MODERN INDIAN LITERATURE

An Anthology

Chief Editor K.M. GEORGE

VOLUME TWO

Fiction

SAHITYA AKADEMI

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SAHITYA AKADEMI

Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110 001
Sales: 'Swati', Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001

Jeevan Tara Building (Fourth floor),
23 A/44 X Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta 700 053

Guna Buildings (Second floor), 304–305, Anna Salai,
Teynampet, Madras 600 018

ADA Rangamandira, 109 J C Road, Bangalore 560 002

172 Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg,
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Foreword

What does the term 'modern' connote in the context of Indian life and letters? Can we mechanically apply western norms, concepts and paradigms to the recent developments in our literatures? Have we really developed a genuinely indigenous modernism, rooted in our own past and dealing with our present social, existential and spiritual issues from the perspective of the future? Is there a monolith called 'Indian literature'? Is it not more in the nature of a mosaic? Can the singular term 'Indian literature' suggest this plurality?

Questions like these are not unlikely to be provoked by the title of this anthology, and I do concede these are important questions and one has to define one's terms. Only I wish the readers would take note of certain facts: Modern in the context of this anthology denotes more than a century of creative upsurge in our literatures, beginning roughly from the 1850s when the struggle against colonialism gathered momentum in India to 1975 when we were compelled to confront the limitations of our own freedom. This was also a period of great debates centred around the momentous issues of nation-building, when Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, M.N. Roy, Ram Manohar Lohia and Dr Ambedkar came up with different and at times contradictory ideas and perspectives on the new nation on the anvil. India's literatures too woke up to the vital social and cultural issues and the term 'Indian literature' began to be contested as well as consolidated in both the critical and the creative realms. Our literatures retain their regional identities in the languages they use, in the locale chosen, in the names of individuals, in landscape, manners, dispositions and details of everyday; but they also often share a common ethos, a common way of experiencing life and a common awareness of shared social anxieties. The literature of the Indian Freedom Movement in various Indian languages seems to be impelled by the same forces and motivated by not dissimilar aspirations. This can also be said of the literature of the *Bhakti* movement in the past, and of the innovative movements of later years, right from the 'modernism' of the sixties to subaltern movements like the Dalit and Women's literatures. Our shared racial and cultural memories and our common visions, struggles and torments have alike contributed to the unity of our literatures—a fact that may very well be testified by the selections in this anthology. Lakshminath Bezbarua may thus be found to share his concerns with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Premchand, Govardhan Ram, Fakir Mohan Senapati, K. Sivarama Karanth or Vaikom Mohammed Basheer. Bhalchandra Nemade's deep urge for thematic and idiomatic experiment

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and innovation is shared by writers as different as Nirmal Verma, Sundararamaswamy, Yashwant Chittala, Manoj Das and Kulwant Singh Virk. The women writers in the anthology, from Lalitambika Antharjanam to Ismat Chugtai again represent a common heritage of tortured and dissenting womanhood, a heritage being enriched by their innovative successors.

The task of putting them all together in a single volume must not obviously have been easy and the credit goes to Dr K.M. George, the Chief Editor of the series and his team of discerning language editors. I thank them on behalf of the Sahitya Akademi. I also thank my great predecessors who had first conceived the scheme as also Professor Indra Nath Choudhuri, our Secretary and all the officials of the National Academy of Letters who have contributed to the successful realization of a cherished project. With the third volume of *Modern Indian Literature* already in press, we have almost completed one part of an ambitious project to bring together samples of the best in ancient, medieval and modern Indian writing.

U.R. ANANTHA MURTHY
President
Sahitya Akademi

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Guide to Users

PRONUNCIATION AND TRANSLITERATION

This book is essentially a composite anthology of literary pieces written originally in Indian languages and here translated into English. It also contains a backdrop of historical surveys. The medium of English has its advantages and disadvantages. The obvious advantage is its great reach and the disadvantage is the difficulty in translating creative writings into this medium which is linguistially and culturally distant from the source languages. Hence to make the rendering of literary items reasonably adequate, transliteration of titles, authors' names and cultural terms (which defy translation) is indispensable.

Every Indian language has its own complex phonetic system and a developed script which can precisely represent most of the sounds. The Roman script used in English is quite inadequate to represent the various phonemes. The approved solution is a system of transliteration where numerous diacritic marks are used below or above the Roman letters. Even with the aid of this system, only a fair approximation is possible; but that is good enough for a work of this kind.

It may appear a simple matter to transliterate all such words which are not found in standard English dictionaries. In practice, it is not so. The most important factor is the convenience and preference of readers interested in the subject. They are familiar with certain conventional spellings of such names and terms. Convention is a strong element, though not always based on a clear rationale. (The spelling system of English itself is based on a long-standing convention.) Having to read Kṛṣṇa for Krishna or Ṭhākur for Tagore or Udiya for Oriya will cause irritation, if not confusion in the reader's mind. At the same time, the average reader is unfamiliar with many authors' names and great many titles of books. Thus a judicious sorting out of terms which need transliteration is necessary.

Conventions of spelling are of three types: the international, national and regional. These conventional spellings do not always agree. The coordinating editors had to depend largely on the styles and forms proposed by the language editors, which generally had a regional bias. This has resulted in a certain amount of inconsistency in spellings and transliteration styles which can be seen when the book is taken as a whole. This has also led to occasional mixing up of conventional spellings and diacritics. It is, however, hoped that such inconsistencies will not seriously affect the reader interested in enjoying the literary works.

Even in the use of diacritic marks a kind of categorization was found necessary. There are quite a few Indian names like Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Gandhi, Tagore, etc., for which transliteration is unnecessary. There are also

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great works like the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Gita, Sakuntalam, etc., which have universally accepted spellings. They do not even require to be italicized.

It has been noted that the average reader prefers conventional spelling and therefore the transliterated form (with diacritics) has been reduced to the minimum. The titles of books and names of authors are given in transliteration (usually in brackets) to aid the keen student.

SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION

Vowels

a	ī	e	o
ā	u	ē	ō
i	ū	ai	au

Consonants

		Velar	Palatal	Retroflex	Alveolar	Dental	Labial
Stops							
1.	vl.	k	c	ṭ	t′	t	p
2.	vl. asp.	kh	ch	ṭh		th	ph
3.	vd.	g	j	ḍ		d	b
4.	vd. asp.	gh	jh	ḍh		dh	bh
Nasals		ṅ	ñ	ṇ	n′	n	m
Trill					r		
Flap					ṛ		
Laterals				ḷ	l		
Fricatives		h	ś	ṣ	s		
Continuants			y	ḻ			
				v Labio-dental			

It may be worthwhile to indicate some priorities and clarifications in the use of diacritic marks.

(i) A lot of confusion is cleared by distinguishing the five short and long vowels

a ā i ī u ū e ē o ō

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The four Dravidian languages have both long and short e and o. The languages of the Indo-Aryan family, by and large, have only the long e and long o and no diacritic marks are used for them. (The marks above these vowels are sometimes shown even in conventional spellings.)

The same symbol ṛ has been used for the vowel and the alveolar trill as the context will reveal which is which (e.g., Pṛākṛt—Here the first ṛ is a consonant and the second ṛ is a vowel).

Vowels a and i occurring at the end of certain words are short in some languages and long in others. The end vowel whether long or short, would not cause any difficulty for identification.

(ii) Optional usages

ī–ee	(Sīta, Seeta)
ū–oo	(Bhūmi, Bhoomi)
t–th	(Sitakant, Sithakant)
s'–s–sh	(Śiva, Shiva, Śaṅkar, Sri, Shri)
v–b	(Viṣu, bihu, Kavi, Kabi)

There is also considerable difficulty in distinguishing the dental nasal (n) from the alveolar nasal (n'). This may not seriously affect the pronunciation.

Casual mention of an author or title would appear in the manner in which the author or translator has given the spelling. However, more care has been bestowed in transliterating the names of authors and titles of books given as entries in the Selection.

ABBREVIATIONS

b.	born	pseud.	pseudonym
c.	circa	pt.	part
ref.	refer	pub.	publication, published by
ch.	chapter	p.	page
ed.	editor, edited by, edition	pp.	pages
e.g.	example	Sc.	scene
etc.	et cetera	Tr.	translator, translated by
no.	number	viz.	namely
op. cit	in the work cited	vol.	volume

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> Maina's mother suddenly wants to go home. She is as suddenly scared of the broad daylight and this bazaar.

Sita seeing Ravana the evil one nearby cast a gloomy look. Contemplated in the innermost of her mind the lotus feet of Sri Ram.

> She casts nervous glances in an effort to retain her sense and consciousness. Black dots of men climb up the steps and talk. Unending talk. All sights are sounds now here. The gray flap of a tent and a canvas bag—they swing and strike each other. The faint shadow of a flag flies past her and the sound from a microphone whirrs in her ears. My stand is this: I was born here and I'll always live here. This small stack of vegetables is all that I have or can ever manage to have. Honest possession this, by selling this much alone I should get a decent living. Yes, this is my stand. The bazaar unquiet and restless and scabbed all over keeps on scratching itself with its paws.

The sun is placed atop the high column. Why at all did you come?—someone who kept himself unseen asked her. Why did you?—a roving voice of the bazaar asked her. A passer-by turned back and asked her the same question. Men ranged in a line moved towards her demanding her answer to the same question. Windows sprang open for gaping mouths, transfixing gazes and shrill voices to bid her answer the question. Stricken with fright she covered her head with the tattered piece of an old shawl and spied through a window-peephole in it. The fear that she felt was the selfsame, ages-old fear.

Some might trample upon the vegetables. She flung herself on them to hold them in her embrace.

> By the evening, with an enthusiasm greater than ever she was selling the vegetables. When the evening was pitched as a tent in the sky she placed a wooden box and a Nepali basket over the spot, a daily ritual of Maina's mother's to keep it under her certain occupation for a tomorrow.

Hāmī Jastai Mainākī Āmā, 1964 *Translated by* the author

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Modern Oriya Fiction: A Selection

Six Acres and Eight Gunthas

FAKIR MOHAN SENAPATI

FAKIR MOHAN SENAPATI (Fakīr Mōhan Senāpati, 1843–1918), father of the Oriya novel and short story, had little formal education and took to writing late in his life. As Diwan of several feudal states in Orissa, he gained first-hand experience of the lives and manners of the common folk, which found vivid expression in his works. With his four novels, *Lachama, Cha Maṇa Āṭha Guṇṭha, Mamu* and *Prāyascitta,* two volumes of short stories and autobiography, he brought a new dimension to the Oriya language which would favourably compare with the sister language Bengali. The four novels together, in fact, present a picture of two centuries of the social history of Orissa. Marked by an earthy realism, rich in irony and humour, they also have a religious strain, with the wicked being punished in the end.

Cha Māṇa Āṭha Guṇṭha (Six Acres and Eight Gunthas) is a vivid account of the exploitation of the poor village folk by the zamindars.

SYNOPSIS

Ramachandra Mangaraj magically changes his legacy of penury into one of plentifulness through an act of treachery and dissimulation when he literally robs the zamindari off its decadent owner. Mangaraj, now grown overtly ambitious and fearfully amoral, has a singular mission in life: the acquisition of wealth. He is amply aided and abetted in this by his mistress Champa, a vile woman with an undesirable past. In the Mangaraj household Champa, by her mercurial presence and impetuous manipulations, practically drives Santani, Ramachandra's wife, into a world of self-imposed passivity as it were, where she is condemned to live as a recluse, surviving only by her superior faith in divinity, until her death on a very auspicious day.

Champa, devious and deceitful, traps the hapless Saria and Bhagia, a childless and poor weaver couple of the village, into mortgaging their *chha mana atha guntha* (literally a plot of land measuring six acres and eight gunthas) to Mangaraj. Mangaraj makes the couple, pining for a child, believe that they will have one if they build a temple for the village goddess. They mortgage their land for money to build this temple. But Mangaraj cleverly gets a court decree in his favour. The loss of land ultimately proves to be their undoing and doom. Unable to release their only means of livelihood and reduced to a life of misery, humiliation and acute deprivation, Saria dies a heart-rending death at the doorstep of Mangaraj and Bhagia goes stark mad.

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Mangaraj, found guilty of engineering Saria's murder, is sent to jail, where his nose is bitten off in a chance encounter with Bhagia, who fortuitously happens to have been lodged in the same jail. Finally, Ramachandra Mangaraj returns home after his jail-term, a very forlorn man, to die an agonizing death, haunted by macabre visions of hell and eternal damnation. He has forewarning of his doom, earned through a life of black deeds. After Ramachandra Mangaraj is sent to prison, Champa, in collusion with Govinda, the cunning barber, steals all the hidden wealth of the Mangaraj household in cash and jewellery and elopes with him in search of a safer haven in the bad old city of Cuttack, from whose back lanes Champa had once migrated to the Mangaraj household. On their way the barber and his wily mistress fall out over the division of their spoils and in the eerie darkness of the stormy night, in the dimly-lit mud-hut shelter of Gopi Sahu's little shop on the river bank, Govinda slits the throat of Champa when she is asleep.

While ferrying across the river at dawn with all the cash and jewellery tied in a bundle, Govinda tries to escape from the searching interrogation of the boatman who has become visibly suspicious of Govinda's crime, seeing his blood-spattered clothes in the morning light. Govinda jumps into the turbulent river in a bid to swim away to safety on the other bank. But he meets his just end by falling victim to a crocodile.

Champa's bloated corpse, now more grotesque after the scavengers sever the limbs to retrieve a few cheap silver ornaments, lies in the open as the police investigate the murder.

Finally, human habitation moves farther away from the site where Champa's murder was committed and her body lay in the open as the place acquires fearful notoriety as Petunipada, the domain of evil, in the popular imagination.

The excerpt (Chapter 22) depicts the gruesome murder of Champa by Govinda. Fakir Mohan gives his readers a consummate experience in the genre of the macabre, while depicting in detail the gory episode.

EXCERPT

Chapter 22

Gopalpur Ghat is on the bank of the Nirupa. This is on the road to Cuttack. People cross the river at this point. Here at one time stood the village Gopalpur. In the catastrophic floods of the eighth day of Bhodua in *the eighth year* the village had been washed away. The village had gone but not its name. On the bank above the ferry there was a large banyan tree. Under this tree was Gopi Sahu's shop-house. The house measured seven *hands* by five *hands*. One half of it was a room, the other half was open. In front was a two-hand-wide verandah. If by some mischance any travellers were stranded here they cooked their food in this open room. Gopi had become old. He was no longer capable of working on the farm. He was a rather sad and broken man since the day his old woman passed away, a year ago. And the sons did not let

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him engage himself in any occupation. But Gopi was not one to remain idle. Striving is better than idling, he believed. It was about a year since he had settled down to this business. In the first hour of the morning, having had a morsel for breakfast, he came to the shop; in the evening he securely fastened the long pipe padlock across the door of the shop-house and returned home. His house was separated from the shop by half a *kos*. In his shop he stocked rice, lentils, salt, *chuda* and tobacco-leaf. When returning in the evening, he gathered all these groceries in a basket and carried them home. He would tell the people of the village, 'These days my expenses have increased. If I don't take a mustard-size opium in the evening, I cannot sleep at night. After taking opium it won't do if I do not put a little chuda flour or roast rice flour in my mouth.' And besides, there was his habit of smoking. However, he managed his expenses out of his earnings. The paisa or half-paisa he made out of the eight annas the sons gave him to start his business, saw him through. He did not touch the capital.

It was the month of Aswina; all day long the sky had been overcast. There had also been one or two showers. The rain fell dripping everywhere and the road had become a tract of slush and mud. But travellers there were none. It was still a good half-an-hour before nightfall but it already appeared to grow dark because of the clustered clouds. Turning to his shop Gopi mused, 'Whose face did I see first thing this morning, that not even a half-paisa worth of tobacco has been disposed of?' Collecting his stock in the basket he tied his napkin-cloth round his head. He sat on the verandah gazing at the sky. He thought to himself—the day hasn't ended yet. He was watching the ferry point. Some wayfarer may yet come to cross the river. Still looking at the ford intently he began to sing a hymn:

> The days have passed away in vain,
> Vainly I let the time go by
> Without a prayer to Sri Hari—(refrain)
> My years go by like the river's current
> To enter the ocean of time, never to return;
> Indulging in pleasures by day and night
> Oblivious I am of my native home.
> To us supplicants grant pity, merciful God,
> So we bear at all times your name
> In our heart.

'Hey, shopman, can we find shelter anywhere for the night?' Startled, Gopi looked and saw two travellers in front of his shop. One of them was wearing a broad loin-cloth, a napkin was tied round the head, a bundle hung at the back, and a palm leaf umbrella rested on the shoulder. That was a man and behind him stood a woman. She wore a silk sari, and wrapped herself in a cotton sari with a kumbha border. Her body was fully covered, only the nose-ring and nose-drop showed. People say, 'If well dressed, you are well received.' From their clothes Gopi inferred that they were well-to-do folk. Quickly he got off the verandah. He saluted each in turn and said, 'At your

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command. Come, pray, come up into the shop; cook your food. All that you need is here. You can have them.' A look at the feet of the two, and Gopi offered them two vessels of water to wash up and spread the torn mat in the open room. The lady first washed her feet, changed her wet clothes and squatted on the mat. Observing the ornaments on her body, Gopi addressed both with, 'Your command, master and mistress', adding this to every word he spoke. And the lady was well pleased with Gopi's courtesy. She took out a four-anna coin from the corner of her sari and flinging it towards Gopi said, 'Oh, old son, bring us all the ingredients for cooking.' Very excited, Gopi picked up the four-anna coin, turned it between his hands and eyed it twice or thrice. After that he kissed it a couple of times, touched his fore-head with it, tied it in the corner of his cloth and tucked it beneath his waist-cloth. Watching his face one would think that he could be saying to himself again, 'Whom did I first see this morning? A four-anna coin even before any purchase!' A strange thing was happening indeed for the first time since the day the shop came into being. Placing all the groceries for cooking—that is, rice, unshelled blackgram and salt, Gopi blew upon the straw wick and lighted the kitchen fire. The woman proceeded to cook the rice, while the man, with a pot in his left hand, went to fetch water. The woman called, 'You old son, will milk and ghee be available here? Seldom do I eat without milk and ghee.' Gopi replied, 'True, at your command, very true! If only they were readily available. Indeed! Are these things fit for your ladyship's dinner? For refreshment, clean, fine rice-flakes, pure cow's milk, jaggery from the south in the absence of granulated sugar, and for cooking, big fish or herring, green plantains, greengram, ghee and milk! What can I possibly do, your ladyship? This is an impoverished area. The dust of your lotus feet has fallen here—it is all my good fortune. Your worship, give me some money. Let me go and look for these in the village.' The woman again threw him a four-anna coin. Gopi tied it in the corner of his cloth as before and ran to the village. An hour or so after nightfall Gopi's younger son Brindabana brought two or three *tolas* of ghee in a plantain-leaf container, about a *mana* of milk in an earthen pot and two brinjals. He said, 'Your command, father has sent these. He has night-blindness, he is not able to come.'

* * *

There wasn't a third person in the shop. The woman was cooking and the man was helping her with the work. The two began to talk. The woman said, 'Did you listen, hey, Govinda? Didn't you listen with your ears open, to how everybody addressed me as "lady"? Wherever I go they will call me "lady". Whoever called you "master"? Oh, you come with me to Cuttack. You will see what I will make of you. I am tired of persuading and trying to convince you these last four days.' Govinda replied, 'No, Champa lady. Come, let us go to our village, let us live there. We will buy land and farm, we will cultivate the land and employ ploughmen.' But Champa sneered, 'It is just as people say,

Very vile is the darkness of night

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> Very vile is the barber's tribe.

What use is land and farm, man? What I have brought with me will not be exhausted even if we sit and eat a hundred years, why, even two hundred years.'

Govinda disagreed. 'No, that won't do. I will go home. I haven't heard any news of home for a long time. My heart is distraught. Or, give me my share. I will leave. You do what you wish.'

Champa turned on him angrily, 'Share? What share? Brother's share? Again it is as people say,

> The mouth watering at sight
> Of neighbour lady's cake,
> Loudly chewing
> The sweetened cowdung bake.

Property—it was mine there, it is mine here also. Have I stolen and brought anything? Seven days in the rain and mud, here in this village now, next there in that village, and in that hamlet; half-a-day here and half-a-day there. You have killed me in wild wandering, and wandering is going to kill me. Say, who buried the gold coins, the gold ornaments in three spots in the corners of the master's bedroom? Who buried them there? In the silent hours of the night I dug holes there, and we two, the master and I, buried the treasure. Did you know it? Isn't all that mine or is it somebody else's?'

Govinda replied quietly, 'True, you buried the money. You did many things. If the key had not been found would you have obtained anything? Who devised the trick to get the key?'

Champa flew into a fury. 'So much ado about this! Of what use would it be to stamp the foot without the toe ring? What a masterly scheme you have come up with! And wouldn't I have found it without your cunning? Didn't you see that day, I walked behind the master two leagues in the hot sands, with blisters forming on my feet, and my throat growing hoarse with weeping and crying. And would you claim now that you have taught me the tricks? What cleverness! Alright, I say. I made friends with that brahmin widow, stayed with her the night and took out the land records from the cache. Did you teach me all that?'

Angry, but without saying a word, Govinda went out and sat in the verandah. Champa also remained silent. Taught in the same school, disciplined by the same tutor in the matter of cunning, neither seemed inferior to the other. Would either of the two retreat easily? Each knew the other so well. Champa considered: If she were to go to Govinda's home all the money and gold ornaments would slip from her hands and pass into the barber's family. It would be difficult to recover them. Moreover, the thought of Govinda's mother and wife came to her mind. On his side Govinda too reflected: Once Champa enters Cuttack town it wouldn't be easy to control her. The bitch will kick out the leaf she has licked when she sees another flung at her.

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If two contrary forces are equally matched each will remain stable in its own place.

It was about three hours into the night. Rice and dhal had been cooked. Champa stood a while thinking. Approaching Govinda, she spoke in soft, mellow words, 'Look, Govinda. You say that your village is four kos on the other side of the river. Alright. Let us go. Let us go to Cuttack. I will give you some money, leave it for your family. If you don't listen to me, then of all this gold and money, you will not see even the back of a broken cowrie shell. Come, come. I am very hungry, come, let us eat.' Govinda also was famished. It appeared as though he was half-agreeable and was about to rise. But in the darkness his movements were not visible to Champa. Feeling hurt at not hearing from him, she said, 'Bother, call a slave a gentleman, he will ride on your neck. Go to! Eat if you like, or don't eat.' Almost about to rise, Govinda sat down again and scowled at Champa. 'Yes,' he thought, 'I am a slave, you a lady.' But he said nothing aloud. What dreams of prosperity he had for himself: vast rice fields, many pairs of oxen and so many ploughmen, many heads of milch cows tethered in the house, many clients waiting at the door for loans of money! All hopes lost abruptly. He was fatigued after a whole day's travel in rain and mud, and hungry too. All this Govinda thought while he sat sadly. Now that Champa called him a slave, he was burning with fury from head to foot as if stung by a scorpion. Yet he could not speak. He knew that not even two of his kind could match Champa. Many a time he had seen with his own eyes Champa assaulting the young ploughmen of Mangaraj's household. Like fire in chaff his heart smouldered.

Champa served rice on the two leaves, made a small well in the heaped rice and poured dhal in it. After a glance outside she poured the pail of milk that Brindabana had brought on her own rice. Govinda watched everything from where he sat in the dark. When he saw the milk poured only on her rice, he felt as though burning coals had been showered on him. He thought, 'If so much greed for this little milk, how much more for all that money and gold!'

Champa called, 'Here, the food is served, eat or don't eat, as you like. I cannot cringe at your feet.' She wiped her lips with wet fingers and squatted before her food and eating noisily in large mouthfuls, soon emptied her leaf. After washing her mouth near the stove, she once again looked out and called, 'Come, come and have your meal.' There was no response. Very much annoyed, she said, 'It is precisely for this reason that people say, "Free food irritates the throat".' To Govinda these words were like fuel to a burning fire. After that Champa spread half the cloth from the bundle on the mat and put the bundle carefully under her head and lay on her back to sleep. Govinda remained seated on the verandah in the same thoughtful manner. He now well realized that it was not easy to snatch the jewel from the hood of the snake. From what one had heard, the people of Govindapur would say, 'We guess that Govinda had great expectations.' It was natural for a man to expect respect, love, obedience and attachment from the wife. It became apparent from Champa's conduct that even if he could be her lover he

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would be nothing better than a barber. Govinda was not aware of how long he sat thus.

The night was so dark that one could not see one's own body. The south wind blew, howling loudly. The rain fell outside, downpour after downpour. Like a mountain of darkness the banyan tree swayed, making fearful noises. Like small pieces of darkness the bats flew about and clung again to the heap of darkness. Still others, like bits of blackness, rose out of the heap to fly about in the sky and eat banyan berries, with squeaking cries. The berries fell, tap tap, to the ground, ghostly noises arose from all directions. Inside the room Champa's snoring sounded even more ominous. At the sound of the snarling and biting of some beasts under the heap of darkness, Govinda was startled and he peered into the night. The lamp inside the room was growing gradually faint. Like the single red ray of light brightening the infinite sky at the close of the evening, the last rays of the dying lamp inside fell listlessly into the darkness.

Govinda looked out intently. Two jackals were fighting while eating the banyan fruit, one drove away the other and began to corner all the fruit for itself. The fight of the jackals gave him an idea. He straightened and peered cautiously all around him. Slowly, very slowly, he got up and looked at Champa from head to foot. Noiselessly he withdrew the barber's bag which he had left in the niche and out of it he removed something. Tightening the cloth round his waist he took a firm hold of that article. Softly and quietly he approached Champa and eyed her intently like the hyena in the wood marking the sow sleeping on the ground. He gazed at her with the same intentness, his eyes burning brightly. Holding something firmly in his right hand he advanced so carefully that even his breathing seemed inaudible. The moment he took one more step forward with his right foot a bright light leaped over Champa and fell on the wall. Alarmed, Govinda instantly descended the verandah. He gazed cautiously in all four directions. Nothing, nobody, only the fierce ghostly noise as before, only the small pieces of blackness flying, shaking the lower branches of the tree. The feeding jackal also had run away. The thing in his hand shone brightly when light fell on it.

Govinda felt reassured. Gathering greater courage than before he advanced slowly to the middle of the room. Like the hyena springing on the sow, he sprang on Champa. At that moment the wick had burnt to its end and went out with a last spurt, leaving everything invisible. There was a violent groan in the middle of the room, the wriggling of legs and hands and finally everything became quiet. On hearing the noise, the jackal swiftly ran away. Like darkness scattering from the tree, the bats flew out with the clumsy flapping of their wings. A stormy wind shook the branches of the trees around the shop-house. It appeared as if a cataclysm had precipitated itself all in one moment in the depth of the invisible darkness.

From *Cha Māṇa Āṭha Guṇṭha*, 1901 *Translated by* K.M. Acharya

guṇṭha a ground of approx. five cents

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the eighth year eighth regnal year of the Raja of Puri
hand in the countryside measurement was by a forearm equivalent to a cubit.
kos approximately two miles
chuda rice flakes
Aswina September–October
tola weight of a silver rupee
mana approximately two litres

The Man of the Earth

KALINDI CHARAN PANIGRAHI

KALINDI CHARAN PANIGRAHI (Kālindī Caraṇ Pāṇigrāhi, (1901–92), one of the most prolific and important Oriya writers of the twentieth century, has published volumes of poems, short stories, essays, plays and novels with considerable success. In his youth, he was intimately associated with the Sabuja group (the Greens) which dominated the Oriya literary scene in the twenties and the early thirties with its progressive ideas on life and literature. Panigrahi was greatly influenced by Tagore and by his younger brother Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi (1907–43), founder of the Communist Party in Orissa and powerful short-story writer with a Marxist bias.

Māṭira Maṇiṣa (The Man of the Earth), Panigrahi's greatest novel, has been translated into many Indian languages and into English under the title *A House Undivided.* His social novels *Luhara Manisha* (The Man of Steel, 1947) and *Ajira Manisha* (The Man of Today, 1958), and the historical novel *Mukta Gadara Khyudha* (The Hunger of Mukta Garh, 1982) are well known.

SYNOPSIS

Matira Manisha centres around a crisis in a peasant family in an interior village of Cuttack. The crisis arises when the younger brother, Chhakadi, at the instigation of his wife, wants to take his share of the paternal property, whereas Baraju, the elder brother, following the wish of his late father, insists on not dividing the property. The younger brother, a wayward, pleasure-loving young man, is guided by Hari Mishra, the village tough. In contrast, Baraju, inspired by his late father, as well as the teachings of the Oriya *Bhāgabata,* believes in cooperation, sacrifice and equality of all. Baraju is at last compelled to leave the village with his wife and two small children, allowing Chhakadi to enjoy all the paternal property. But after Baraju leaves the house, Chhakadi feels miserable and follows him to request him to come back to the family home.

Matira Manisha evokes an intimate portrait of Oriya rural life. Characters such as Baraju, Chhakadi, Harabou (Baraju's wife), Netramani (Chhakadi's wife), Hari Mishra and Dharama, a *Bauri* (an untouchable), have almost become archetypal.

The excerpt included here portrays a moving scene where Baraju tries to persuade his wife to change her attitude towards her sister-in-law and brother-in-law. Baraju is guided by a philosophy which vaguely combines

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Gandhian non-violence and socialistic equality, though the novelist never uses the names of Gandhi or the term socialism in the work.

EXCERPT

Baraju thought Harabou wouldn't change her attitude if he left the house. He had to find a way out living in the same house. From now onwards, if Harabou breaks her promise, then Baraju would observe his vow of silence. He wouldn't talk in the house; wouldn't speak a word either to Harabou or to the children or to anyone. If he stopped talking to Harabou alone, she could manage the household talking to him through the children.

Eight or ten days passed, Harabou didn't open her mouth at all whatever the provocation by Netramani. But she kept feeling suffocated. The younger daughter-in-law wanted a fight, with her invectives, 'you the burnt one, the widow, the childless one, the eater of your own child's head, the killer of your daughter's husband'. How could Harabou tolerate all this? When Baraju was not home, she too uttered a word or two occasionally, and then kept quiet. A word from Harabou was enough to make the younger daughter-in-law mad with anger. Harabou's only worry was Baraju: if he got back by chance and got to know of her replies! With Baraju in his room or on the verandah, Harabou maintained perfect silence.

For some reason Baraju came back early that day with his ploughs. While loosening the bullocks from the ploughs at the doorstep, he could hear the noise from inside. Harabou was heard uttering a word here and now, like putting straw into the fire, and the younger daughter-in-law was burning fierce. Noticing Baraju inside the house Harabou was stunned and kept quiet. Looking at the face of Baraju she felt like dead wood. The younger daughter-in-law had already lost her sense of decency. At the sight of the elder brother-in-law her voice no doubt became a little less loud, but did not stop altogether. Baraju thought that his was a cursed life; it was for him that the home was going to be in ruins—all prestige, all reputation gone, the sweet home completely destroyed. Will everything at last come to an end? Will there be a wall raised in the middle of the house and will they be separated? Will the quarrel stop then? The seeds of the quarrel lay in everything: who dug a hole or threw the kitchen ash in whose bit of land, whose cat visited whose house, and so on. Does it mean that one of the brothers will move to some other place? Why should man live in villages with his neighbours, if he was so frightened of the Satan inside him? Should he not live alone in the forest?

Baraju did what he had decided. He totally stopped talking in the house. He didn't respond if his wife asked anything; didn't utter a word if the children talked to him; he was not only dumb, but dumb and mad! How strange! What sort of a man was he who wouldn't talk at all! At the behaviour of Baraju how could one react—laugh or cry?

Day after day passed; Baraju never talked. Sometimes he looked as if he didn't understand anything. Earlier, he never ate a morsel of rice without a

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little fish or meat. Somehow a few *jaradis* or some bitter-fried fish, grilled with leaves, would be arranged for him. But now, he even stopped looking at fish or meat. He has taken an oath; how can he deviate before the goal is achieved? Without oil, his hair looked dry and unkempt; his body lost its lustre. When Haṛabou, as usual, came to him at night to massage his feet with oil, Baraju would leave the place instantly, without uttering a word. When Baraju stopped talking in the beginning, Harabou didn't appreciate it; but now she felt like crying. That was the new-moon-day when pancakes are made in every home. Baraju was very fond of pancakes. That is why Harabou prepared soft pancakes, with a lot of coconut paste in it. She wanted to feed her husband to his satisfaction.

Baraju was busy spinning a bundle of jute; he had preserved the stacks of *Berhnan* grass to weave a mattress. Both the children sat beside him. Harabou swept the floor and left a full plate of pancakes beside him. She rushed again to the spot with half a bowl of milk, a pot of curry and a lump of molasses. No sooner had Baraju taken half a pancake to his mouth than he got up. Harabou couldn't restrain herself. Suddenly bursting into a loud cry, she held Baraju's hand and said, 'Why on earth are you torturing me like this? Please have your meal, I will do whatever you want me to do. I will take any oath you like.' Since the day Baraju stopped talking, the elder sister-in-law hadn't uttered a word to the younger sister-in-law. But that was not enough—there are other things too—and the most important thing is one's own mind. If the two minds do not agree, there would be no peace or happiness.

Baraju started talking, 'Should I speak? Would you act as I wish?'

'Oh yes, surely, I will do as you wish, I will.'

'Why don't you understand, why don't you act in a way that will make everyone happy?'

'Well, I understand nothing, know nothing. I will act as you wish.'

'Are you sure?'

'Oh yes.' Tears rolled down Harabou's cheeks.

Chhakadi and Netramani, meanwhile, had witnessed this drama peeping through the door of the other room. Baraju stood like a ghost, his hair uncared for, and his wife Harabou—proud, not used to submitting to anyone—stood holding the hand of her husband, bowing down her head. At the sight of this farce, Chhakadi and Netramani had a hearty laugh pushing pieces of cloth into their mouths.

Baraju, standing like the unmovable Mount Meru, said, 'Well, tell me you will never from your side enter into a dispute with the younger sister-in-law, will never quarrel with her.'

Baraju's feet got drenched with the tears flowing down from Harabou's eyes. Sobbing like a child, she said, 'Never, never shall I have a dispute with the younger sister-in-law, never shall I quarrel with her.'

'Will you keep quiet, whatever she might say?'

'Yes, I will keep quiet whatever she says.'

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'Well, let's go inside; I will tell you what else to do.' The wife's tears had collected over Baraju's feet. He alone knew if the tears were warm enough for his hard feet.

Harabou thought she had already been laughed at by the enemies. Well, if the enemies had laughed at her, it was in the presence of Baraju. So what was wrong in that? If he was the snake-charmer, she was his wife. After all she had already abandoned her garb, the sense of prestige. What else was she afraid of? This younger sister-in-law, Chhakadi, or the neighbours? She didn't free Baraju's hand and insisted, 'Please tell me whatever you want.'

Baraju was a man without a sense of prestige or vanity. And yet how much he had tortured his foolish wife, how much suffering he had inflicted upon her ! And yet she was the mistress of his house, the mother of his children. It is the woman who is worshipped in the form of Lakshmi, Shakti, Devi and Durga. How could Baraju consider her so inferior! Baraju was very happy that today Harabou had abandoned her false sense of prestige.

Standing in the same position he said, 'Well, tell me now onwards you will first attend to the needs of Chhakadi and Netramani, will first serve the food to them—whatever is cooked at home, milk or ghee or whatever is available—then come the children, and lastly, you and I.'

With her eyes closed, Harabou repeated every word again. 'Lastly, the children. Why not? The children do not belong to me alone. If he thinks this to be right, well and good.' Harabou turned her body to stone.

Baraju, with a smile on his face, said, 'Holding my hand, you have agreed to everything. If you do not keep your promise, I will assume you do not care for my life.'

Harabou, embarrassed, let go of Baraju's hand. For how long had she stood in that position holding his hand!

Baraju came back and sat before the plate of pancakes. He chatted with his children merrily. All of Harabou's vanity was gone; but it seemed to her that she could cover the entire floor of the house with one step when she heard Baraju saying, 'Get me a little curry, get me a chilly, will you?' As if someone had removed a mountain off her chest—that was the extent of her relief! As if a piece of stone had turned into a human being! Both the home and the world outside seemed so nice!

From *Māṭira Maṇiṣa*, 1931 — *Translated by* Ganeswar Mishra

The Clay

GOPINATH MOHANTY

GOPINATH MOHANTY'S (*Gopināth Mahanti*, b. 1914) contribution to Oriya literature and language has been both prodigious and profound. So far he has published nearly

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60 books belonging to different branches of literature, like the novel, short story, drama, folktale, biography, etc. His monumental and moving tales are woven around the simple joys and unmitigated sorrows of rural and tribal people, the humanity centre-staged in his scheme of things and in whose midst he has discovered the abundance of rich human values, timeless and universal. His diction has all along been the spoken language, using the special idiom of the commonfolk. At the same time his style has the unique capacity of capturing the subtle shades of human emotions with unusual refinement. Gopinath Mohanty received the Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1955, the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1970, and the Jnanpith Award in 1974. He is also a recipient of the Padma Bhushan.

Māṭi Maṭāla (The Clay, 1964), from which an excerpt is given below, is an epic of Oriya rural life. It is the longest and the most outstanding novel written by Gopinath Mohanty.

SYNOPSIS

Rabi, a young graduate, comes to the city in search of a job and spends the night with his one-time collegemate Bipin, who has become diffident and morose, working as a petty official. Rabi decides not to get tethered to a job but dedicate himself to the uplift of the village. On his way home he happens to rescue Chhabi, a young innocent village girl, from the attack of a wild monkey, and they fall in love with each other. Rabi accepts the hospitality of Sindhu Chaudhury, Chhabi's father, and spends the night in a hovel at the house of Chaudhury. He goes home the next morning; but his sojourn at the Chaudhurys' gives rise to wild, baseless rumours of a romance involving Chhabi and Rabi. People cast aspersions on the Chaudhurys and forbid their children to attend Chaudhury's school.

Sindhu Chaudhury is a kind of stoic philosopher who has all along led a life of deprivation without any rancour or remorse. In spite of the wild gossip and social ostracism, he carries on as before, showing exemplary faith in providence and moral courage. When Rabi comes to know of the plight of the Chaudhurys he holds himself morally responsible for the situation. Later when Rabi's father, Bata Mohanty, turns down the proposal of Chhabi's marriage with Rabi, the young man feels frustrated and leaves his native village.

Rabi comes to Phulasara, a remote village, where he decides to work his utopian dreams into reality. But Phulasara proves to be no village of idyllic serenity or mythical innocence. Tension mounts high and violence erupts on the festival day of Holi and Rabi gets hurt in trying to separate the warring villagefolk. He refuses to take legal action against his aggressors. By his nobility and idealism he wins the hearts of the people and peace is restored to the village.

In the meantime, Sindhu Chaudhury, knowing where his daughter's heart lies, unhesitatingly turns down prospective marriage proposals from apparently well-established quarters for his daughter Chabbi. He is full of admiration for the good work Rabi has been doing far away in Phulasara and hails him as the herald of a brave new world. Chhabi, following Rabi's example, devotes her time to social work in her own village and manages to emerge from the cocoon of social constraints.

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As chance would have it, Rabi and Chhabi meet again as they conduct rescue work in the region in the wake of floods. Chhabi impresses everyone, especially Rabi, by her dedication, maturity and social concern. Before Rabi returns, he invites Sindhu Chaudhury and Chhabi to visit Phulasara on the first anniversary of the social mission he had launched there. The young man achieved much during his short span of time, his dreams were coming true; the age of hope had arrived. The book ends with the celebrations of that day. Chhabi also makes her personal pilgrimage to the land of hope where she would find Rabi, and would not lose him ever.

The excerpt from the novel that follows presents a graphic account of the deteriorating situation in the village and of the attempts of selfish men to fan the flames of suspicion and discontent. It recreates vividly the snowballing of tensions and conflicts which eventually leads to the loss of an Eden.

EXCERPT

Once the fight started the whole village was completely splintered. It was as if the layer of oil and turmeric had been neatly wiped off the face and revealed the real texture of the skin betraying age-old ailments which had dried up for the time being but had not healed. Perhaps these contradictions were there before in the corpus of the rusted society. They were unable to weather the salt-laden winds of change, as a result of which, before the new creation had a chance to emerge, the old lay crumbling and giving way at places.

After the sudden quarrel when Noka Nahaka's party and Kinei Ojha's party stood ranged in groups; all set for a showdown, there had been several repetitions of such incidents in the manner of the tableaux of *Ramleela*. The first occasion was special. On that day, the immediate cause before them was the scandal in the name of Sindhu Choudhury's daughter. But soon Noka Nahaka and Kinei Ojha were ready for bouts of abuse at the slightest provocation. Reasons had been piled on other reasons and the original reason for the conflict had got lost somewhere along the line. The immediate issue bothered everyone. The rest was soon forgotten.

Sindhu Choudhury's school had closed down. The children were happy. That school which cost nothing, which came free and did not have to be paid for, did not affect anybody when it disappeared. But it had not been possible to excommunicate him because the servicemen would not agree. Sindhu Choudhury had been brushed aside long since in the fervour of this bitter fight. He was a Choudhury only in name but when it came to a quarrel he was worthless, he neither had the spirit nor the capacity to shout and manoeuvre. He was disqualified in the test of abusive challenges and in taking exception to things. He could only sit down to the spinning wheel or read the *Bhagavata* quietly. The opposite camp had once held him in great regard. They didn't even greet him formally these days or speak to him. That settled matters so far as he was concerned. He was not the man to take it seriously and barge into a controversy. It happens that something is regarded as a god by some; if they cease to do so, it becomes nothing but a piece of

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stone. Let the stone remain as it is but if you decide to kick it, you'll only hurt your feet.......

But although Sindhu Choudhury was not available on the occasion of the clashes with sticks and swords, people bypassed him and continued to clash in groups. Noka Nahaka was a gigantic animal who would make weapons to strike by coaxing the other party with sweet words. Each of the groups professed that they had the welfare of the village at heart and in this very attempt found themselves ranged against each other at every bend.

In the village, neighbours had been involved with one another in both joy and sorrow. In the morning they borrowed fire from one another's oven and when they ran short of a little salt or a betel leaf they borrowed from one another. When a few sprigs of spinach were pulled out from the backyard, or a few drumsticks were plucked they sent some to the neighbour. When presents of sweets came from the house of the daughter-in-law, a lion's share was first distributed among the neighbours. On top of all this, of course, there was the daily give-and-take of curries and rice-cakes. In all these various ways the people of the village were involved and their lives entwined with one another. Waiving the question of caste they had come to address one another as their very own, close family relation: *Daadi, Bhaai, Apaa, Khudi, Maausi* and *Maamun.*

But suddenly we see someone having a long face when he returns from the field or the shop. On crossing the threshold he stamps his feet, flings his arms and legs about and thunders. Suddenly close neighbours appear obnoxious. The glance at the next house stings the eye. He calls his wife and confides, 'Do you know what has happened in their house? Just wait and listen carefully to all that I have heard. And mind, you are not to set foot there. He who has a dagger up his sleeve and wishes us ill all the time, is of no concern for us.' Children are severely reprimanded: 'You Dhuliaa and you Saabi! Why do you run to their house every now and then, and gang up with their children? If I see you doing that again by any chance I'll twist your face out of shape. And take note of that cat of theirs that strays into our house regularly and eats up things. Let people control their pets. If that cat comes again, beat him up and break his legs. I find Saabi always carries that cat about. If I see her doing that again, I'll break her legs as well.'

People come to whisper. After dusk there is yet another gang. Sides gather strength. They continue to discuss in secret about who said something to whom and how he's to be sized up and such other big issues. In these parleys the whole history of a man is recapitulated, some forgotten incident of a day, some hearsay, some facts not only relating to this generation but to the past two or three. Research about the means of vengeance to be wreaked gives an outlet to the political instinct of the villagers, providing an excellent chance for its full play. Villages continue to have discussion sessions. Even villages like Pateligan, which were exceptions, are contaminated briefly by this mentality. They seem to relive the medieval Hindu history. These are also Hindus.

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Reasons bear fruit and ripen and produce seeds of fresh disputes every day. A log of wood had been lying around to be used for making the doors in Dhobei Jena's new house. All of a sudden it was missing. On the other side, inside Govinda Ojha's yard closed on all sides by a thick hedge, the sound of an axe was heard. The inmates of Dhobei Jena's house had no other way but to sit on their doorstep and call on God as witness to the whole thing, and invoke his curse on the nameless thief. But the curse of God did seem to fall on Ojha. One night half the length of the hedge around his house got chopped off, seemingly by itself. Even the huge root potatoes in his yard which are a speciality, being proverbially the size of an elephant's foot, and of which he would have sold at least two maunds that year, were missing—nothing left even for the purpose of seeds. If somewhere the thatch was pulled down to serve as fuel for parboiling rice, at others stacked up dried corn was lifted to provide feasts for a whole gang.

For example, there are patches of vegetation which one has to pass on the way to the river for bathing. Someone waits for the opportunity to lift water-melons or other vegetables from someone else's field. If a person can't do anything he can at least let the herd wander into the other man's field or courtyard and thus have his satisfaction. Cows are mothers and are not to be killed; they are also too clever to be caught and tied up. The kine-house is six miles off and if the offended person is tenacious enough to set off for it, it's left to the offender to collect a gang and snatch the cow away by a show of lathis. To think of going to court for compensation is another thing. The inexperienced villager feels odd and afraid at the very mention of the word. It is said that entering the court is like the outbreak of cholera. Still the touts on both sides have not given up hope. This is the golden opportunity. They keep repeating: 'Aren't the villagers ever going to understand what is law, their right? Are they going to give up foolishly what belongs to them as a matter of right? That's why they are distributing wisdom gratis in the hope that people will eventually understand.'

The burning example was there right before their eyes. The huge goat of fisherman Dhanua suddenly disappeared. Dhanua belonged to Noka Nahaka's side and he was thoroughly upset looking for it all over the place. And like the falling of the palm-fruit exactly when the crow flies off, the same night there was a feast on the outskirts of the Mahadev temple, adjoining the yards of Aparti Padhan. It was just a few days before *Shiva Chaturdasi*, the birthday of Lord Shiva, and meat and rice were served. Whoever was asked as to where the meat came from, replied, 'How am I to know?' And they were right, they were to share in the feast and not to ask what came from where. Why should the trader of the cargo enquire about the value of the ship?

But it was Agani Ray who insisted on making an issue of it. Agani Ray was the counterpart to match Gadei Lenka on the other side in respect of brow-beating and setting people against one another. Both were distant relations. When it was a question of improvement of the Khandayat community, the two stood phalanxed to help with advice and moral support. But in ladling out advice in a legal conflict the two were sworn enemies and always took

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opposing sides. They frequent the town, supply clients to the lawyers and *muktiars* there, and make a little business out of the supply depending on the case and the client. Pleaders or muktiars, new in the profession and eager to set up a practice and establish themselves, pay fifty or more than fifty per cent as commission for supply of clients. . . .

With a self-propelled desire to serve the community, Agani Ray left no stone unturned to locate Dhanua's goat. The goat must have got assimilated into the digestive juices of several stomachs. So Agani set out to discover the story of the attainment of its *nirvan* and for traces of its mortal remains. In his search he unearthed all the details of the slaughter which occurred in the small hut surrounded by thorny and bushy hedges where formerly there was a small hermitage. But some time had intervened since the slaughter and the investigation was not easy. After much search, two horns were found. He called Dhanua to the spot and gave a fiery speech attended with gesticulations about what must have very likely occurred, after which Dhanua the fisherman seemed to witness vividly through his third eye the final scenes of his goat's life and was convinced that the horns were his goat's and of none else. He was convinced that his goat had provided the highlight of the feast in question.

But however much Agani tried to egg him on to file a suit, his efforts proved vain. To the question of a lawsuit, Dhanua the fisherman responded like a goat being dragged to water. All Agani's efforts were neutralized by Sindhu Choudhury. Quoting his very words, the ignorant, illiterate fisherman with his blunt commonsense explained to the 'learned' Agani Ray: 'After all, it's only a goat! But if I file a suit then like *dakshina* after the gift, I'll have to pay for three or four goats from my pocket: one during the police enquiry; one each time a date is fixed, to feed the witnesses. And in case I win, two more will be needed to celebrate! Where will I get all these? I'm a poor man and by the time everything is over, I myself would have turned into a goat. The fees of the lawyer, your commission, the various requisites of the witnesses, shoes, umbrellas, tobacco, toy horses and elephants, all these have to be paid for. And on top of it, one has to run to the court on each date fixed before the case is taken up. One has to keep hanging around under the banyan tree from dawn, to be told after dark that the judge has left the court and another date has been fixed! If, in between, an officer is transferred and another comes in his place, the entire story has to be repeated from the very beginning for his benefit. To top it all one has to face insults, be cross-examined by lawyers or be driven out by the peons. What a pity! One work of insult leads to two years of fighting a case, in the course of which one has to hear a thousand words of insult and may finally return home after losing the case. Forget the goat! It would have died some time. No point in taking all this trouble!'

Dhanua the fisherman escaped his clutches. Agani Ray went about saying, 'This is the way of ignorant day-labourers, because they aren't educated. Their eyes are not opened, they don't know what their rights are and what rightfully belongs to them. So long as they aren't made conscious through

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education, they'll remain like this. They can't appreciate the good advice given to them.'

Dhadia barber quipped, 'If they won't take your advice, nor will pay you a single penny in return for the wisdom you dole out, then how can you carry on your business?'

Agani Ray exploded, 'Shut up!' He said, 'You are an insignificant fellow, a mere barber! How can you know what is what? You'd have known if you'd been educated.' He called ten people to witness and said, 'If Dhanua fisherman had filed a suit, you'd have seen how the opposite party would have been sized up. Would it have been against one only? Oh, no! The whole gang had feasted, the whole gang would have been rounded up and dragged to the court. The case would have been filed to the effect that they had broken into Dhanua's house, beaten him up and snatched away the goat. You'd have seen how sections would have been added to sections against them. I tell you, and please note, the way these people are wreaking vengeance, they can't be brought to their senses without legal action. Please try to realize this. If you don't have the money to pay the cost, pool your resources together. Otherwise you'll see, with the passing of time, the ailment will magnify and not subside.'

Agani Ray's speeches were like scattering mustard seeds on stone but sometimes there is a crack and from it a seedling sprouts and grows into a plant. Although a suit was not filed, people started talking and discussing among themselves.

Agani Ray was a strange character. The man was dark, frail and tall; his gaunt face was smooth and looked clean-shaven because it was hairless from birth, and his bald head was like a longish wood-apple fixed to a long iron rod. His one bad habit was smoking indigenous cigars made of whole tobacco leaves rolled with his own hands. He was fifty-two; a string of oversized beads made of *tulsi* wood wound around his neck and he had white marks of *tilak* paste on his forehead and ear-lobes. When he went out to the town he donned a long and threadbare coat of the colour of the paddy-steaming pot. Its top buttons were missing so that the oversize tulsi beads peeped through; a coloured towel-cloth hung from his shoulders. He had an umbrella in his hands. All these added up to lend an aura of a certain distinction which increased when he started speaking. Agani Ray does not look at anyone's face when he speaks but weighs every word which he moulds. The rest of the time his muzzle is in perpetual slow motion as if with thoughts that occur, but aren't ripe enough to venture out. When he stares at anyone in the face with his hollow and sunken eyes, his fixed gaze seems to sear through and cling.

Oddly enough, Agani Ray's words came true in just a matter of days. In addition to Dhanua's goat, those of others also started disappearing and the corresponding number of feasts also increased so as to occur every two or three days, maybe in a mango-grove today or in the river-sands next time. It even started to happen to cattle—maybe a severed tail today or a lame leg

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the next day. Aparti Padhan's side wanted to show its strength, there was no doubt.

Agani Ray became more insistent. 'Don't be afraid of law-suits', he said. 'Wake up, pull yourself up, let's go to the town.'

But suddenly one day, in the early darkness of one evening, he got his answer. After finishing his day's work in the town and wearing his black coat as usual, he was returning to the village along the embankment. The village was still at a distance, on one side was the river-sands, on the other acres of paddy land, in front on both the sides of the embankment a mango-grove, and it was very dark there. People are a bit afraid of the place, ghosts haunt the place they think, the place smells of fragrant smoke and fresh food, and the tops of the trees move violently even though there is no wind; and strange things drizzle below. As they walk along people feel afraid. Holding desperately to a piece of iron and whispering the names of their gods they rush through the grove. But Agani Ray had no such fear. While wandering through the mazes of law-courts and digging deep like an insect into lawsuits he had been at least convinced that the talk about ghosts was a superstition. . . .

But the very next moment, what confusion: A leaning branch overhead swayed about with an uncanny rustling noise, followed by wailing like that of a new-born babe. Agani thought it must be the vultures' shrill cry. He thought so and laughed at his own wisdom: 'This is what frightens people and they call it a ghost.' There was some more noise: 'How! How!' Two or three more trees swayed. The flock of langurs must have got disturbed by the noise of the vultures, he mused, and walked on. Suddenly screams rose from one tree after another and then in unison. What could this be? *Kochilakhai*? Or, some wild bird? He had never heard the like of this. He quickened his pace. A little further on, after he had crossed the last tree of the grove, he stood flabbergasted. On the embankment there were four strange and black shapes, stark naked; they held hands and jumped about in a wild devil-dance, going round and round. It was a ghastly sight. They continued to dance and descended the slopes to the left side of the embankment in the direction of the burning ground below. Agani came to, and trembled violently. His mouth got dry and his tongue stuck to the palate. He felt hot and started sweating. From the grove behind he heard piercing screams. The village was about a mile off. Agani did not pause. He looked around once and saw that no one was there. He started running with all his might along the embankment, as if he was running for his life. But the ghosts also had legs, and besides, the ghosts could float in the air. There were noises of grunting, 'Umph! Umph!' behind, which approached closer as though someone was at his heels. Agani kept running. His foot got stuck in a fox-hole and he somersaulted and fell flat and banged himself. There were bruises all over his body but before he could take in all this and realize fully what was happening, four ghosts hemmed him in. They were shadowy and continued to dance the devil-dance around him. Agani clung to the last ray of his fading consciousness and ran with all his might—this time not on the road over the embank-

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ment but straight as the crow flies, through the fields towards the village. Just then there rained blows with thumping noises. My God! The fists of the ghosts were so very tough! He bumped against something and fell flat; still he was not spared. The blows continued to rain incessantly. Agani Ray dragged himself along, stood up with all his might and tottered forward. He couldn't divine what was happening. He rose and he fell, he fell and he rose, several times. Even if he couldn't see, he could sense four stark naked ghosts. He went beyond the bamboo grove and in front of the *Bauri Sahi*, fell faint. The ghosts had descended from his shoulders.

Agani Ray was bedridden for two days. Miser he was, yet he sent for the witch-doctor and made offerings at the temple. At least until he fully recovered he developed faith in God.

The matter came to light.

Aparti Padhan called everyone onto the road and said in public, 'Some blows have got home in the dark. Let him go to the court and file cases in the name of whomsoever he pleases. Number one accused: *Babana* ghost; number two: *Baastura* ghost; numbers three, four and five: all ghosts. . . .'

Gadei Lenka quipped, 'Oh no, no! Not that way! On such-and-such a day, in such-and-such a place, at such-and-such a time, the accused collected together, insulted us, heaped abuses on us and threatened to devour us, and with kicks and blows galore rendered us senseless and threw us overboard. The witnesses to all this were, item number one, he-jackals: two units; mango trees: four units; vulture: one unit; and so on and so forth. I am willing to draft his application gratis if he would approach me!'

From *Māṭi Maṭāla*, 1964 *Translated by* Prajna Paramita

Ramleela a stage presentation of the story of Ramayana
Choudhury a title given for meritorious service
daadi father's younger brother
apaa elder sister
khudi father's younger brother's wife
maausi mother's sister and also elder female cousin
mamun mother's brother
dakshina the gift in cash which is made along with any gift in kind
kochilakhai a bird which eats kochila, leaves bitter to taste
Bauri Sahi the area in which mostly Bauris live. They are harijans who work as farm hands
Babana, Baastura These terms are usually given to persons who have no place of stay or who have no kith and kin

Sweetmeat

BAMA CHARAN MITRA

BAMA CHARAN MITRA (Bāmā Caraṇ Mitra, 1915–76) wrote five volumes of short stories, a book of fiction and a few essays. Creative writing was a passion with him.

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Apparently meditative in temperament while dealing with themes, he often shows his analytical prowess and an irrepressible penchant for humour which redeem the heaviness in his stories.

Laḍḍu (Sweetmeat) tells us vividly the predicament of a man without much buying power in a predominantly materialistic world. His progressive dehumanization is movingly narrated as he becomes victim of a personal sense of guilt and takes recourse to deceitful and delinquent ways, if only to keep himself from cracking under severe emotional stress.

Past Choudhuri Bazaar, Paresh Babu no more looks to his left. Speeding up, he marches on eyes turned right, swinging his shopping bag. One would think he had got a crick in his left shoulder. He turns his head at last only when he has neared the Municipal Market. But today a cow suddenly came upon him with lowered horns. He started up to look at the animal when a bull came on, puffing, full tilt. Paresh Babu was forced, for dear life, to get up onto the verandah of that shop! The bazaar louts guffawed . . . 'O for the gent! He comes marching along looking heaven knows where—never minding the cow on heat, oh!' But their words scarcely reached his ears. His heart suddenly seemed to stop, his ears reddened, his forehead sweated—not from fear but from a sudden unendurable desire. For it was the self-same shop which on his way to the market every day he passed hurriedly by, avoiding even a look in its direction in order to spare himself the torture of its temptation. And yet, every day he must needs take this same road, though there were others to the Municipal Market. His feet would just bend themselves to this road. It was those sweetmeats, those *laddus*, that drew him in that direction. Now his desire seemed to have become irresistible. And somehow, with this, his other primeval desire had awakened too.

Lady Canning, the wife of the Viceroy, had also fallen into the grip of desire. She had developed a great fondness for a certain kind of Indian sweetmeat and, being in no want of money, had bought great quantities of it and eaten them. The sweetmeat came to be called after her name: Lady Canning, or *Ledikeni*, thanks to the twist of the Indian tongue. It is a tale of the long past. Lord and Lady Canning have since returned to dust and as dust have reared blackberries and strawberries, which fruits have gone into other people's bodies; those people in their turn have returned to dust. Generations have thus come and gone, the British rule has given place to Indian independence, but Lady Canning is still remembered. She has become immortal through her desire. Paresh Babu, of course, is not going to become immortal for his desire. Far from being a Viceroy or President he is not even a head clerk. He is a mere court clerk on fifty rupees a month. The few heads of his budget include none that might have anything to do with the organ of taste. A tongue he surely has, but that is only for making up to—making up to his wife or his boss or his moneylender or his God, with, of course, about the same result in each case. The wife's standing order is that the daily shopping may not exceed

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half a rupee. Also, the right to select the items of shopping is exclusively hers and the list she makes out scarcely leaves room for finding even a paisa for *paan* or things of the sort. Once he tried to make up to a shopkeeper in order to save a copper from the amount due to him on account of some leafy vegetable. But the insult he received in reply deterred him from making any such attempt in future. On another occasion he had bought three quarters of a seer of some equally insignificant leafy stuff in place of one whole seer and strutted back home puffing cheerfully away at a cigarette bought with the two coppers thus saved. The sequel, however, was too awful for him to try any such thing ever again. The lady at home, his lawfully married spouse that she was, grew suspicious as she looked at the quantity and fetched a balance from a neighbour. The wordy shafts that she let loose at him after she had weighed the stuff made him smile inwardly in sheer chagrin. 'Just imagine,' he thought, 'the poets writing only about the shafts from the eyes!'

Getting up to the shop, Paresh Babu looked at those laddus. Somebody came in a car, and buying a seer of the sweetmeat, handed it to a lady inside the car. Joy played in her eyes and on her beautiful lips as she received it. Paresh Babu hastened to leave the shop, but his feet would not move. His eyes, too, clung to the sweetmeats in the shop while his nostrils expanded again and again at their savour.

'Please take a seat. What may I get for you?'

'O no, nothing indeed. It was only that bull which charged at me—'

'He's gone.'

'Yes, he has.'

After this there was no excuse for staying on. Yet he lingered, unable to move out of the shop. Not that it was a new kind of sweet, after all it was the same old preparation from pulses, yellow and round, made up of little globules. Only some of the globules were coloured—some red, some green, and the sweet was topped by a fine big currant and some pistachio parings. The different colours had been combined with such an exquisite feeling for effect that the attraction of the laddus had become quite irresistible. And to top it all, the big brass dish holding them was not just placed in that conventional fashion in which such dishes are usually kept, ranged in tiers inside a glass case; no. A figure of a woman displaying the charms of her rich full curves in a bathing suit, while she held the dish closer to her shapely bosom in an attitude of making an offering, stood inside the glass case. Paresh Babu took repeated looks at that figure of composite temptation and was about to step down from the shop when the feminine figure seemed to giggle from inside her glass case and say: 'Come hither!' Paresh Babu's ears reddened again. Another customer came and went away with some of that sweetmeat. It seemed to say: 'It is not for the one without riches to win me!' He came out of the shop and stood on the steps. Not far from there stood the cow in silent expectation while the bull licked her neck and started off and on in a sudden restless

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spell. Paresh Babu cast a look in that direction from the corner of his eye and once again looked at the dish of sweetmeats in the shop. No more able to resist the temptation, he went up again into the shop and asked:

'What's the price?'

'Price of what? *Dilmohini*? Six rupees a seer.'

Looking a bit of a fool, Paresh Babu said, 'O no, I was only asking the price of one.'

'Six annas a piece.'

Taken aback, Paresh Babu gaped while he thought—six annas! If it were at most two annas he could have made up to the shopkeeper in the hope of getting the price reduced. But six annas! Where on earth could he find that amount? It was impossible. Well, let it go.

Another customer came and left with two seers of Dilmohini. Paresh Babu looked into the glass case. Only a few laddus were now left in the charmer's dish. There was that 'come hither' smile on her cherry lips and gazelle eyes. Turning away, he looked the other way. The bull had achieved his object.

Paresh Babu tried to call up the spirit of renunciation.

Two birds of the same name and always together live in a tree. One of them eats the luscious fruits of the tree while the other only looks on without ever tasting them. Immersed in the pleasures of the tree of the body, the being experiences sorrow because of its delusions. When it realizes the all-pervading universal Spirit, it transcends the world of temporal joys and sorrows.

Every creature has the five organs of sense. None but man, however, has been given the faculties of thought, intelligence or will to resist the temptation of the senses. In trying to work his will to battle with the powers of sensual attraction, man has created philosophy, religion, ideals. But these have nothing to do with the business of living and so can all be called false. And yet humanity consists of these falsities; for who can say that man may not some day attain godhead through the law of evolution acting through his will to achieve the objects based on these falsities? It should be his ideals that should direct his economic policy, nay, his policies of education, administration, everything. But what obtains now is its exact opposite. It is only his concern to earn more money that at present guides his policies of education, administration, finance. All that apart, from the worldly point of view too it would be wrong for me to eat that sweetmeat. The task of fulfilling the desires of everyone in my family is mine. If through temptation I fulfil only my own desire, I shall not only have done a wrong but also have been a despot. When a government yields to temptation, no matter whether it is monarchic or republic or socialist or communist, it becomes despotic. . . .

Paresh Babu had read a good deal and was well-informed. He was also able to think for himself. But his speculations went one way while his desire went the other. In the course of his reflections, however, a thought

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struck him: the Supreme Being was not to be realized through the frustrations of the incapable and weak.

And another customer came and bought a seer of Dilmohini, 'charmer of the heart'. Only two were now left. There was no more time, no time for abstract philosophizing. Something had to be done, and done quickly.

Paresh Babu once more went up the steps down which he had come in the course of his musings. Instead of abstract philosophy it was now fear that gripped his heart and froze his feet. Absolute dread laid hold of him as the scene of his possible return home with an empty bag rose before his mind's eye.

'No, a poor man has no right to such a thing', he told himself. 'For him there is the soul, the Supreme Spirit, religion, self-denial, self-control, abstinence. Well, is not all the moral lecture of the government meant only for men like me? For our smallest lapses, committed through some temptation or other, all the moral instruction, police action, and the like come down on us. Why, self-control is indeed best for us. And for that matter is not the government itself founded on our self-control? It does not matter if a few at the top indulge themselves, but if we too should give way to self-indulgence—'

Yet another customer stepped up and walked in, pushing him aside, and asked, 'One Dilmohini, please.'

Looking into the glass case, Paresh Babu saw the last Dilmohini lying near the shapely bosom of the feminine figure. He was no more aware of himself. All philosophy and meditation suddenly swept away, he stepped into the shop and sitting down at the table ordered:

'And one for me.'

There was nobody to listen to his order just then. He waited a while and fell to hesitating again. Oh, it was unbearable!

The radio played. The red stole of some woman was being blown away by the wind and she was joyously informing everybody about it at the top of her voice, singing 'Mere lal dopatta udu jaye. . . .'

Somewhere inside the shop the shopkeeper listened, entranced. Paresh Babu listened in too. As he listened his thoughts went that way: 'Bravo, Bombay films! Bravo new woman! One has seen the streetside performer with the monkey tell his animal: "Show your belly, old boy, to these gents, they will give you money for filling it." So also does this woman wheedle money out of folks' pockets by swinging her hips and showing her belly and all. The government takes no notice of these things, caring a pin for what might happen to human dignity. Earn more money and still more money, increase national income—that seems to be the only object. On the one hand, ways for satisfying desire and greed are multiplying, while on the other, lectures to put them aside are being showered upon us by the high and mighty. Why, one is truly done for between these opposite pulls.'

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And now another man came and took a seat at his table. He had only said, 'Dil . . .', when Paresh Babu, putting aside his sociological deliberations, shouted out in a sudden frenzy—'For how long have I been asking for a Dilmohini and nobody listens!'

At his shout two or three shop-hands came running and hurriedly taking the last Dilmohini out of the glass case placed it before him. Paresh Babu ate it with about the same hurry, paid up, and left. Contradictory thoughts and alternating desire and inhibition had thrown him into such a ferment that he merely ate the Dilmohini but did not get its taste.

Out of the shop, he came to his senses again. He looked at his shopping bag. Dropping the idea of going to the market, he went to a Benaras paan shop and bought a paan for four coppers and a cigarette for another four. Then he turned to go home. But his feet would not move. And yet there was no help. It was already ten by a clock in one of the shops. The fear of losing his job rose above the fear of meeting his wife. His feet found their pace.

But what explanation was he to offer at home? Once he thought of making straight for the railway station from where to make off to Hardwar and become a *sadhu*. He even went some way towards the station but then changed his mind. It hurt his manly pride to fly so. Who was he flying from? And why the deuce?

He turned homeward again. A little distance from home, his pace slackened. He stopped a while to think out a way.

Yes! That's it! That's just right!

Turning into a lane, Paresh Babu looked about a bit and then took off his shirt. Then smearing its back with some sludge from the drain, he put it on again and went home.

As he entered his house he called out 'O Ma—O Ma—'. He put on an expression of great distress in that call.

His mother, who was at her devotions, hurried out and said, 'Why, oh, it's my Pari! Why, what makes you call out like that? What on earth is the matter?'

'Matter? Only, I am not dead. Please fan me a bit!'

'Ah me! Ah me! What has happened to my son, my pet—D'ye hear, *bohu*? Get the fan, quick—Oh how did you get that sludge all over you, my son?'

'I'll tell you. But fan me a bit first, let me get back my breath.'

Flurried, his mother got the fan herself and began to fan the son. Paresh Babu took a long breath or two, patted some water on his head and dried it with a towel. Then, leaning against his mother, he said, 'I had done the shopping and was coming back home when a bull came up from behind and pulled the leafy stuff out of the bag. The bag dropped from my hand and the vegetables rolled out on to the road. Two more bulls and a cow ran up as if out of nowhere to eat them. I picked up a stone to drive them away when one of the bulls butted me. I fell down and what do

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you think happened then? I was all but run over by a car which came dead on me to miss me by a hair's breadth. It was only through your blessings, Ma, that I escaped by the skin of my teeth.'

His mother burst into tears. Then she ran to the deity's room and hurried back with all the flowers and *bel* leaves from the deity's feet and showered them on her son's head.

The wife, after she had heard everything, looked suspiciously at him and asked, cool as a cucumber, 'Is that the truth?'

'Oh, look at her, Ma, look at your bohu, look how cruel she is—!'

The wife turned away with a sneer.

The mother railed volubly at her daughter-in-law. Paresh Babu joined in with, 'Oh, none like one's parents in this world. Everybody else is only out to suck profit out of one. See, money is more to her than my life! But better one lets one's wife alone, for is she not a sucker every way?'

His wife's eyes flashed fire at this. 'Precious lot that one can suck out of you,' she snarled, 'dry bones that you are!'

Paresh Babu could contain himself no more. Beside himself with rage at this insult he ran into the kitchen with the intent of giving his wife a beating. He even raised a hand but finally failed to bring it home. In impotent rage he lifted the earthen pot containing the food and dashed it down into the courtyard. His wife drew down her veil and got on the bed.

Paresh Babu's mother squealed on, 'What did you say, you unfortunate beggar of a woman? Isn't it you sucking my son dry? Isn't it, isn't it? Or, why is my son thinning away so? He doesn't get even a little milk. All the money he has to spend on you alone.'

'Your son doesn't get enough to eat?' came the daughter-in-law's reply from inside the bedroom. 'Then what about my children?'

Fretting and fuming, Paresh Babu changed into another shirt and got ready to go to his office. Looking at the time-piece he saw that it was half-past-ten already. He hurried along, panting. He no more remembered the quarrel at home, he was now thinking only of his boss, a strict man. He tried to think up an excuse for coming late.

'Well,' he reflected, 'if this small temptation of mine raised so much trouble and even made me to resort to deception and falsehood, small wonder that those who are tempted by greed for territory, power, riches, should need to invent the hydrogen bomb. . . .'

'Well, *Delhika laddu jo khaya wo pastaya; jo nehi khaya wo bhi. . . .*'

Laḍḍu *Translated by* J.M. Joardar

Delhika laddu . . . Wo bhi One who has eaten *Delhika laddu* (fabled to be life's finest prize) feels cheated—by its commonness; one who has not, of course, feels cheated, too—by life itself.

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The Visitor

KISHORI CHARAN DAS

KISHORI CHARAN DAS (Kiśori Caran Dās, b. 1924) has published two anthologies of poems, one in Oriya and the other in English, a book of essays and more than a dozen collections of short stories. Some of his stories are also available in English in two volumes. He has also been translated into French, Spanish, Arabic and some major Indian languages. Most of his themes and characters are sensitively chosen from the middle and upper middle class milieu of contemporary society, whose ethos he understands best. He weaves his tales of psycho-sociological import around people's joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, their manners and morals. Kishori Charan Das has been a recipient of a number of literary awards including those from the Orissa Sahitya Akademi and Central Sahitya Akademi.

Atithi (The Visitor) is a powerful story of the protagonist who becomes a victim of an act of personal indiscretion and gets caught in the web of conflicting forces, unable to conform to the hard social parameters or abandon the callings of the private world.

'Listen,' Suniti's husband rang her up from the college, 'you're going to have a visitor this evening. From your parents' place.'

Suniti was thrilled. It was a long time since anyone from home had shown up; her mother had visited her during last holi. In fact, it irritated her so much that she had recently dashed off a stiff letter home, complaining about their indifference.

'Who's come?' she wondered.

'Guess who', her husband tittered. 'Your Jagudada. Don't you remember him—Jagadishbabu, the advocate? Okay, listen, I have gone and invited him to tea. Don't take long to prepare something. The old man has to catch a train at seven in the evening. . . . I'm afraid I'll be stuck here the whole evening. Meeting of the lecturers' association, you know. I hope you do not mind, my pretty little golden girl. . . .'

Golden girl. Her husband's term of endearment. He was so sparing about it that everytime he used it Suniti felt she was some kind of a white mouse or rabbit—petite, tiny, furry and cuddly—whose only desire in life was to snuggle close to the husband, his protective arms engulfing her completely.

Today, however, the name failed to weave its spell. The magic was missing. Jagudada would be coming here this evening, Suniti groaned.

Jagudada was not her own uncle. He was a distant relative; more a kind of respectable elder of the locality where her parents lived, than a relation. And before that spring evening five years ago he had been to her something like a temple or a townhall or a *kutcherie*—venerable, but distant and largely irrelevant. Then suddenly he had entered her life. Like a whirlwind.

What a low-down creature, she thought. What business did he have to spy on us in the first instance? Oh, the perverse curiosity the man was

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possessed by! Maybe he couldn't help himself. But once his prurient interest was gratified, couldn't he have quietly made his exit? Did he have to linger there and clear his mean old throat, the old lecher? What on earth was the old billy goat doing in the school compound at that hour . . . gazing at the stars, eh? Never mind, he might have had his damned reasons. But why did he have to peep through the windows? Oh, the creep, the peeping Tom!

Alright, let him show up, she hardened. I couldn't care less. I am not flustered.

However, she felt uncomfortable. Jagudada's impending visit brought home the realization that she didn't really deserve her husband's endearments. The golden girl was not pure gold, after all; there was so much of dross in the precious yellow metal.

She resolved to keep up her spirits at any cost. She crossed over to the mirror and started combing her hair. She hummed a tune and began to think of her husband. Gradually, her spirits revived. She imagined burying her husband with kisses. 'Yes,' she whispered, snuggling up to him, 'I'm your little golden girl.'

Crooning to herself softly, she set about cooking for the visitor. I must take myself in hand, she decided. I mustn't give way. This sinister dark cloud will pass; maybe it'll rain a little, make the path a trifle slushy, but pass it will. And I will be restored to my husband's wonderful world—to its cosy, reassuring warmth.

The visitor arrived. She felt a flash of panic when he cleared his throat.

'Ma,' Jagudada greeted her, handing her his walking stick, 'I hope you are all right.'

Suniti nearly screamed: Oh, this man! This menace of kindness! Will there be no respite from this fellow, from his kindness? Kindness, ha! Humbug! It's a facade. It's meanness through and through. The low cunning in his old dead-fish eyes, the eyes that have become more prying with years. Not even the smallest speck of dirt escapes them. The big booming voice—a voice that hangs palpably in the air instead of fading into silence, something that could be measured as if it were a concrete, tangible object. The greying walrus moustache—wild and ugly. The white handkerchief always jutting carelessly out of his coat pocket like a pencil stub from behind a seasoned shopkeeper's ear. It's awful, this pretence of his being so damn busy that he doesn't have time to dress properly. And that horrible clearing of the throat, as if he's being compelled to speak only as a matter of duty. And, to cap it all, that supercilious Mahatma-like smile peppered with a studied touch of sadness—the sadness of knowing too much. His advanced age his insidious worldly wisdom, his phony kindness, his utter meanness.

Suniti touched his feet and asked after her parents, Jagudada's wife and other relations. As she arranged in the cupboard the things sent by her

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mother, the memory of that spring evening when Jagudada's kindness had first petrified her, flashed in her mind.

* * *

Huddled together in the corner of a classroom in the gathering twilight of that wild spring evening, they heard a voice they couldn't place. It was like one heard from great heights or great depths, so faint as to make one wonder if it had been heard at all. The desperate lovers clung to each other more tightly, perhaps to wish it away. Then they distinctly heard someone clearing his throat. Their embrace slackened, their eyes full of fear.

'Who's there?' Suniti asked, mustering her courage.

'Oh, is that you, Suni?' came the unhurried voice. 'Don't be scared, child. It's me—Jagudada. Come out for a second, will you?'. . .

What else could anyone have done in my place? Suniti wondered. I can't blame myself.

* * *

'I asked your father to come along with me, you know', Jagadishbabu chatted. 'But is he the type to leave his home and hearth so easily! What excuses—the cows will cry, the family deity will starve, the city climate never suits me, so on and so forth. One crazy excuse after another, by God! I said, come on, old boy, it's time you took a look around the world. But he being what he is—content with his home and family deity—why'd he listen to me? That his children are well-settled is enough for him.' He laughed and added, 'Suni, I can't stay long. I've to look up somebody before catching the train. A big business magnate of this place, you know. I won him an important law suit last year. Let me see if I can wheedle something out of this old stinker for our school library.'

Ah, what pretence! Suniti fumed. The good samaritan, the go-getter, the do-gooder, the benefactor, who must go everywhere, must worry his poor head over everything, for the whole community is his family and every poor soul owes him a debt! Suniti remembered her own debt to him—her enormous excruciating, painful debt. Can't I ever repay it? Can't I settle it in any other way?

She bristled with regrets. Why didn't I confess before Father right away and be done with it? Maybe he would have got mad with me, but so what? I, too, could have got even with him by showing how I was down in the dumps. Maybe I should have even tried to commit suicide. Father would have sealed himself up in the prayer room for a few days, but in the end the crisis would have blown over and everything would have been alright. Why did I have to incur the debt of this cur?

'I wish I knew you were coming', she said, hurrying off to set the table.

Jagudada grinned widely.

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'I am afraid I couldn't prepare anything special for you', she apologized, serving him water in a silver tumbler.

She looked after his comforts and listened to his incessant chatter. She hated every minute of it, the terrible torture. Can't I ever pay back the debt? She cried to herself.

'I can't guzzle as much as I used to', Jagadishbabu droned jovially. 'Getting old, you know. But look at me, I have kept myself fit as a fiddle. Taking long walks every day, you know. Now, my youngest daughter Tonu, you know, the precocious child, she asks me, "Daddy, why do you carry that stick, can't you walk without it?" I laugh and tell her, "Yes, my little one, I've become old, you see." Suni, you ought to see how she shakes with laughter, that tiny mite. She's five going on six. Her younger brother will be a year old this December. You haven't seen this child of mine, have you?'

No, she muttered under her breath. I haven't. Nor do I intend to, for heaven's sake. Don't expect me to be interested in your perverse family life. Oh, how could the new aunt let an old lecher like you sleep with her? Didn't she scream out? How could you go and marry a slip of a girl fit to be your daughter? Wasn't this second marriage of yours hideous?

'Why don't you have a few more *rasogollas*, Jagudada?' she asked.

Jagudada took one. 'Don't you worry,' he chuckled, 'I'll be coming frequently. You can stuff me then to your heart's content.'

Suniti's heart skipped a beat.

'Now I know why the rasogollas of this place are so much raved about', he continued. 'That reminds me, Tonu's mother has asked me to carry some home.'

Take, Suniti wanted to shout, take as much as you want. I'll send the tins by post if you want. But please, please don't drop in here again. I don't want to see your face for the rest of my life.

She knew it was childish—childish and meaningless. Even in case Jagudada stopped coming, his sinister shadow would hover over her. This man is supposed to have saved me from the scandal, she groaned.

* * *

Her heart pounded as she came out of the classroom. An unknown fear gripped her. Jagudada stared at her pale face, perhaps trying to figure out the extent of the affair. She tried to put on an indifferent air, but she knew she wouldn't be able to stand his scrutiny for long. She would have burst out had he persisted a little longer, but the astute fellow beat her to it. 'Come', he said, patting her on the back. 'Let's go. I'll take you home. I'll not breathe a word to your father. Nor to anyone else for that matter.'

She did not spurn this assurance and snap back: A fat lot do I bother, Jagudada, go tell it to everyone, I haven't done anything wrong. On the contrary, she clutched at it like a drowning person. Thank God for this

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reprieve, she thought. I must think everything over. It seems serious. Oh, let me catch my breath and sort out the matter.

'Who else is in that room?' Jagudada asked. 'Bira Nayak, is it? I know, you see. Well, never mind, I am not going to tell anyone. You just keep quiet about it, alright? I will take care of everything.'

She had an urge to shout: Take care of what, Jagudada, take care of what? What's there to be taken care of?

She felt vastly consoled that everything would turn out fine in the end—her love, her dream, her future.

'Don't you worry', repeated Jagudada, caressing her shoulder.

They walked past the old gaunt banyan tree near the school, the lovers' messages, true and false, engraved on its trunks; the tea-stall of Mahendra Barik (who used to pinch her cheeks while giving her a free lozenge when she was a kid and whisper: My little pet, you'll be something when you grow up); the church, its walls green with moss, resounding with the evening bells; the government park, where roses bloomed all round the year; the bathing ghat of Manikma pond and a bunch of young loafers sitting on its steps and braying over something. As a child, whenever she was upset, she wished to drown herself in the blue, ice-cold water of the pond.

No one spoke to her, no one seemed bothered about the event. It seemed as if the kind-hearted Jagudada had already put in a word to everyone. Maybe that's why all these people are looking at me more with compassion than admonition, Suniti thought.

Finally, that inevitable meeting with her father. But before he could say anything, Jagudada volunteered: 'Suni was walking alone from her friend's place after her studies. I thought I'd better reach her home. Have you finished your evening prayers, old boy?'

Her father did not reply.

'Have you noticed how thin and emaciated you've become, my poor child?' he said, turning to Suniti. 'Why do you have to study so hard?'. . .

For a split second, Suniti thought she was going to cry. But she didn't.

* * *

Jagudada finished the tea. Buttoning up his coat, he scanned the room. He seemed to approve of Suniti's stint as a housewife—the clean crockery, the spick-and-span floor, the framed portraits of good old Mahatma Gandhi and Siva–Parvati.

'Next time when I come', he said, his voice mellow with the pleasure of bestowing a prize upon a promising student, 'I must bring Tonu's mother along. I'm sure she would love to spend some time with you.' Grinning from ear to ear like a long-lost friend, he continued, 'She quite looks forward to it. Do you know why? For the silk saris of this place! Of course, these saris are now available everywhere, but buying them from here is a different thing. . . .'

First the rasogollas and now the sari! Suniti braced herself.

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'But one thing,' he rattled on. 'I have to take a similar sari for my eldest daughter Jayanti, too. Picking the right stuff for both of them can be quite a job sometimes, you know. And one has got to be so careful. You know why, don't you, Suni? Ha, ha!' He just stopped short of giving her a dirty wink.

Yes, I know why, Suniti thought bitterly. I know it. Who else would understand your shameless joy if I don't? Your second wife is as young as your eldest daughter, if not younger. And the big, large-hearted, just fellow that you're, you wouldn't like to discriminate between them, even in buying a small thing as a sari. Wonderful! But Jagudada, have you ever seen yourself in the mirror? I mean, your inner self, your soul, or whatever you call it? If you haven't, then listen to me. I'll tell you. In the light of the day, you're the long black coat, the man about the town; in the darkness of the night, you're a gross body, the body of an animal. Your social work, your legal profession, your maleness! And your kindly detachment! What is it all but your heartlessness, your meanness! To the world at large, of course, you are the complete human being—embodiment of ***dharma***, *karma, arth, moksha*, and what have you! But you couldn't have been a creation of God. No, never! No God could have had the heart to create a man like you. What do you think you're born for—to save the Sunitis of the world?

Suniti simmered. The dark torrents of abuse spewed forth. Now, you old goat, don't gawk at me like that. Don't go on chewing your beastly paan, casting evil glances on my house, my little nest. Don't you gloat that all this has been made possible by you. You have nothing to do with it. I will not let your vile shadow darken my skies. Never, never, never! Alright, let's face it. Maybe I couldn't have got married to Birabhai, and it's good that I didn't. Maybe the marriage would not have worked out at all. The sheer intensity of love would have put the marriage on the rocks. But you can't denigrate Birabhai—my first love, my prince. Oh, that noble, sensitive face of his! How I wished he were another Christ and had me cry my life out over his crucifixion! You will never understand the sublime beauty of our relationship. By the way, what do you think you saw that day—what did you see, what did you imagine, you old goat?

Suniti felt confidence rising in her. She looked at the visitor. There, there, how stolidly he sits like an old vulture, patting himself over his success in creating, shaping this world of mine! But I'll destroy his smugness. The fellow has had enough. I'll show him I'm no longer indebted to him. I owe him nothing, I am ashamed of nothing. I will tell him I cherish the memory of Birabhai and those beautiful days. Ah, you poor old man, how I would love to see you jump out of your skin! I'd love to see that, by God. You will wonder, what's gotten into this girl? . . . . Could she still . . .?

Jagudada's gaze lingered on the basil plant in the courtyard.

'Dada, how's Birabhai these days?' Suniti asked.

'Who?' He seemed not to have caught on to the question.

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Suniti tensed.

'Who, Bira Nayak?' Jagudada paused. 'Don't tell me you still remember him!'

He chewed his paan meditatively, smacking his lips. 'Bira? He took his law degree early this year and joined me as a junior. Not doing so badly, you know. . . .'

Suniti was hushed. She had nothing else to ask, she had her final answer. An intense, aching silence engulfed her—the utter silence of the moment when one sees into the heart of light, or of the endless desert.

Jagudada rose. Suniti touched his feet. And amidst the farewell pleasantries, she heard him say: 'I'll come again. Do you hear, child? I'll come again. Maybe right next month.'

His voice seemed to flow into her, in relentless waves, like the refrain from Eternity.

Atithi, 1968 *Translated by* K.K. Mohapatra and L.L. Mohapatra

The Blue Mountain

SURENDRA MOHANTY

SURENDRA MOHANTY (Surēndra Mahanti, b. 1922) is a major writer who has enriched Oriya literature and language with his prolific contributions. In his long and varied career, he has been a parliamentarian, newspaper editor, columnist and public speaker, literary historian, critic, novelist, biographer, travelogue writer and storyteller and he has dominated the Oriya socio-cultural literary scene during the post-war decades. So far, he has published about 50 books, belonging to different genres, his autobiography being the latest in the tally. *Andha Diganta* (1964) and *Nīla Saila* (1969) are two of his famous novels. Through an astute and potent use of Oriya idioms, as also analogies and imagery, he has transformed the Oriya language into a rich medium and has set new trends in writing.

Surendra Mohanty has been the recipient of a string of literary awards, prominently, the State and Central Sahitya Akademi awards and the Sarala Award. Sambalpur University honoured him with the Bharata Nayak Award in 1969 as the top litterateur of the state.

SYNOPSIS

Nīla Śaila (The Blue Mountain) is a historical novel. The political turmoil of eighteenth-century Orissa forms its background. Ramachandra Deva II, the Bhoi king of Khurdha, converted to Islam and was renamed Hafiz Kader Beg. The conversion was more out of political considerations than out of a genuine change of religious belief. Ramachandra Deva's devotion to Lord Jagannath remained as strong and intense as ever, and no wonder he did his best to foil the machinations of the Muslim overlords at

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Cuttack to destroy Jagannath as the rallying point of the Hindus. Waging a lone, subterranean battle against not only the bigoted Muslim rulers but also a large section of the temple administration, run by self-seeking turncoats, he saw to it that as the king of Khurdha, he was not edged out of the privilege of conducting the ceremony of sweeping Jagannath's chariot during the car festival. The ceremony of sweeping the chariot symbolized that the king was the representative of the Lord—His First Attendant. Had this ritual stopped, it would have been easier for the Muslim rulers to gobble up the little kingdom of Khurdha which spearheaded the clandestine movements for independence.

However, the analysis of the political history of eighteenth-century Orissa is not the only concern of this novel. It celebrates the indomitable life-force of a people who lost out to the Muslims. In spite of the military defeat their spirit was not crushed. The struggle continued, but as Mohanty points out in the preface to the novel, it was not a struggle against the religion of the victor: it was a struggle against the enemies of humanity, against the enemies of universal brotherhood, love and peace; tears soaked it, suffering ennobled it.

The spirit of Jagannath pervades the entire atmosphere of the novel. 'Portrayed misshapen, limbless, with huge round eyes, Jagannath is the synthesis of all faiths and cultures, and the revered symbol of worship of the Oriya people.' No other deity in human history has been so humanized as Jagannath. To the Oriyas, He's almost a living being; He inspires love more than awe, affection more than fear. Legend has it that He and His elder brother Balabhadra fought like soldiers when the empire of the Oriya king Purushottam Deva was threatened. Legends and myths about His love for all those who seek Him abound in the folk literature of this country. *Nīla Śaila* has naturally drawn copiously on these.

Yet the novel is not about the worship of Jagannath—a God who enjoys a major festival every moon. The smallest temple ritual is pregnant with meaning which the novel tries to bring out. The book is, above all, about the common men and women who lived beyond the pale of history, their hopes and aspirations, their suffering and misery, their struggles and resilience, their intense humanity. If turncoats, traitors, liars, back-stabbers, self-seekers sail in and out of these pages, it is just to show the kind of world mankind has lived in. Good and evil coexist, and good does not always triumph over evil, but on the rare occasions when it does, the victory is sweet indeed.

EXCERPT

From the depths of the temple rose the muffled orchestra of pipes, cymbals and drums, signifying the end of worship. The lion-doors were about to open. For a moment the pushing and shoving abated, and the pilgrims, a giddy sea of ants, stood eager and expectant, with their hearts in their

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mouths, rooted to the ground. They had converged from the four corners of the vast country; many were dizzy from the strict fast they had kept for the occasion. The front yard of the temple was bursting at the seams. The place was so packed that there was no room in it for even a mustard seed. Who would miss that vantage position? To witness Jagannath from the seventh step was salvation: final liberation from the shackles of rebirth.

Down the steps the preparation for the holy procession had started. Waves of cries for the Lord rose high, growing fiercer as minutes passed. Cymbals clashed, bells tolled, pipes keened and drums rumbled. The lion-doors were about to open any moment now.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the doors were flung apart. It was as if the shut sluices of time had burst. The bell-boys on either side of the stairs banged the bells, their bodies rhythmically arching back and forth like taut bows. Conch-shells blew, drums rolled and pipes wailed. The temple attendants carried Sudarshan on their shoulders and deposited him in Subhadra's chariot.

The elder Lord Balabhadra was brought out of the temple in a riotous dance, the crown of flowers and *solawork* on his head bobbing up and down like wind-tossed waves. A horde of tribal attendants grabbed him by the waist while another sixteen pulled him by the arm—taking two steps forward, one backward. It was a breathless dance, and the attendants put Balabhadra down on the ground several times to recover their breath. The beautiful, slim-waisted, heavy-hipped *devadasis*, hair tied in serpentine plaits, and flowers and silver ornaments tucked into the dropping buns, danced. Dragged, pushed and prodded, the elder Lord was borne to His chariot.

There was a lull. No one noticed how unobtrusively, and without a fuss, sister Subhadra boarded her chariot. She was like a bashful bride not wishing to draw any attention to herself.

Then the biggest procession started, the procession of Lord Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe. The crowd surged forward. In the ensuing stampede some fell down and were trampled, some were separated from their groups, but no one had eyes for all that. The *darshan* of Lord Jagannath was all that mattered. Only the Lord: the God with the great arms, the Saviour, the Deity with round eyes, the Redeemer. 'The stumpy moves on by his own will', said someone. 'If he does not wish to move an army will fail to drag him an inch. And look at the way he lets these mortals shove and push him: He undergoes the torture because he wants to come out of the temple so that we sinners might feast our eyes on him and save our souls.'

In some hoary past, legend has it that he dwelt underground in some god-forsaken place named Sonepur from where King Indradyumna stole him, carried him here and built him this temple. Is this car festival then a relic of the past, a symbolic re-enactment of that journey? What the hell, let the dry-as-dust historians and bloodless philosophers break their heads

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over its origins; for the millions of pilgrims who trudged hundreds and thousands of miles from all parts of the country, overcoming many hazards on the way, the wondrous sight of the Lord on his chariot was all that mattered. That was the greatest happiness their eyes would ever behold. What did they care for the erudite and conflicting claims of the Jains, the Buddhists, the *Five-nighters*, the Tantrics and the Vaishnavas? Jagannath was Jagannath—beyond the pale of sects. Seeing him in his glorious procession was bliss enough—the culmination of hopes cherished through the chain of birth, death and rebirth. One glance at the round eyes, and life, banal, empty, doomed to sorrow and misery, is flooded with meaning, significance, joy, hope, salvation. It was this which drew the pilgrims to Puri. Epidemics, distances, highwaymen or fatigue could not deter them. To fasten a look on the black face—out in the open on His wooden chariot—is to attain paradise. There was a profound magic at work, tugging at the core of their beings—something to be felt, not to be analysed coldly.

Lord Jagannath's procession touched off another stampede, the seething mass of humanity of all castes and religions, pressing ahead with outstretched hands to touch the image. The flower crown of the Lord disintegrated in the melee with the pilgrims making a scramble for it. Anything would do—a petal, a leaf, a piece of solawork, even a tiny piece of stick. It seemed as if the Saviour could save the sinners by shedding His own flesh.

The sight deflated Raja Aminchand's vanity. Already he had been forced to abandon his palanquin way back at Jagannatha-ballav; and pushed, jostled, crushed within an inch of life, swept along by the current, here he was—a mere nobody, a veritable insignificance, a tiny ripple in the ocean. Nobody looked at him twice.

The longer he observed the procession, the more he realized it was no ordinary God that the Oriyas worshipped: Lord Jagannath was the symbol of the unity, strength and greatness of this proud race. The Lord was the King, even of the man who sat on the imperial throne of the land. The mighty Akbar had acknowledged defeat before Jagannath; his Mansinghs and Todarmals had bowed down their heads. Compared to them who was the *Naib-nazim* Taki Khan? And, as Taki Khan's deputy, who was he, Aminchand?

The procession drew nearer. A drove of pilgrims jumped over Aminchand's shoulder to pluck a petal out of the Lord's flower and garland. 'Stand away', Aminchand's bodyguards screamed. 'Clear off.' But who would pay any attention to this frivolous threat? The bodyguards picked Aminchand up before he fell and carried him out of the crowd.

The procession ended. The temple attendants put Lord Jagannath on a wooden board, dragged him to the chariot and hoisted him up.

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A million voices rose high in praise of the Master of the Universe. The breathless silence was over, and the crowd sang, prayed, ululated and cried. The vendors started hawking their wares in loud voices. The hard drums rumbled, the frog-drums croaked, bugles wailed, and children cried for toys; men bumped into relations they had not seen for months; women met their girlhood chums to whom they had vowed eternal friendship over mango and *bakul* blossoms; strangers embraced one another like blood brothers, exchanging confidences. The big path was eloquent; it spoke with a thousand tongues.

It was the time for the lesser gods. They were brought out of their sanctuaries in hurried processions and whisked to their chariots. It was always like this, every year—these sights were nothing new. The pilgrims knew the itinerary by heart: Madan Mohan and Ramkrishna come out through the south door; Ramkrishna lends his company to Baladeva, while Madan Mohan shares the chariot with Lord Jagannath. They also knew the significance of all this: as the primeval deity, Lord Jagannath synthesized in him his earlier incarnations of Ram and Krishna. Still, the sights were fresh to them, seeing it once meant craving for more.

After the gods had taken their places in the chariots, waves of praise and prayer to the Lord and ululations broke forth with renewed vigour. The Vaishnavas hit their drums, clanged their bells and broke into a dance.

The rituals were not over yet. The soldiers blew their trumpets and clanged their cymbals. The priests received the diamond-studded necklaces from the goldsmiths and hung them round the necks of the deities. The flower vendors offered garlands. The head priest, soaked in sweat, came out of the temple and ascended the chariot. The other priests followed him, with their clothes in boxes and bundles, as if they were going on a long journey. The boxes were stowed away at the back of the chariots. There remained only the ceremony of sweeping.

The junior temple administrator had already been sent to Ramachandra Deva with the proclamation and the command-garland of Lord Jagannath. The Balisahi palace having gone to seed—which was closed to the converted king of Khurdha, anyway—Ramachandra was waiting anxiously in his temporary palace at Madhpur. According to the rule, it was the duty of the senior temple administrator to invite the king for the ceremony of sweeping, but the man had simply vanished.

Aminchand had been deputed to prevent, by hook or crook, Ramachandra Deva from performing this ceremony, but his plans had come unstuck. A chill ran down his spine. The king would arrive any moment now, with the gold broom, and sweep Lord Jagannath's chariot, and he, Aminchand, lost in the crowd, would merely look on like a poor beggar. A wave of impotent anger swept over him. Someone tugged at his turban, and he clutched at it with both hands to keep it from falling. His

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helplessness brought tears to his eyes. He backed away a few steps and bumped into a blind singer. The singer, unperturbed by the milling humanity, thumped his tambourine and sang a prayer, his lilting voice awash with love, tears and pity. Aminchand recognized the words of the poet Dinakrishna Das. Someone started hitting him within, as it were with a mace, and he began to tremble. Regrets he thought he had long stifled, rose like birds and fluttered about inside his head. He felt something constricting his stomach and squeezing his heart. He looked up at the blind man whose face was as calm and serene as the evening sky.

The sun moved westward. By this hour, in earlier years, the chariots were already home at Balagandi and the welcome-worship finished; but this year even the ceremony of sweeping had not begun. The pilgrims were restive. The clouds came sailing from the south like floating barges. The dead heat of the midday lessened.

The sound of trumpets, bugles and drums rose in the distance. 'The King!' the crowd cheered. 'The King!' Lusty shouts of praise unto God rent the sky. The Big Path cleaved in two.

The royal procession drew nearer. The eighteen feudatory kings of the hills walked around Ramachandra Deva, according to their ranks, with fly-whisks, fans and umbrellas. Even some of the nobles of the Mughal domain had joined the glittering procession, risking the ire of Taki Khan.

'Long live the King!' the crowd cheered. 'Long live the King of Khurdha!'

Aminchand's self-confidence was completely eroded. He realized this procession was not a mere religious affair but a victory march for the political unity of the undefeated land of the Oriyas. And Lord Jagannath was its fountainhead of inspiration. What chance did he, Aminchand, have against it? People mightier than him had failed.

The royal procession stopped in front of Baladeva's chariot and the king climbed up. The crowd went into rhapsodies: 'Long live the living God! Long live King Ramachandra Deva!'

Aminchand looked around for Gauri Rajguru, the senior temple administrator, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The sun dipped. The wind-blown clouds piled up and painted the sky red. A wild breeze sprang up. The silken pennants atop the chariots flapped and billowed. In the distance the thunder rumbled.

From *Nīla Śaila*, 1969 *Translated by* Kamalakanta Mohapatra

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Eternal Grief

MAHAPATRA NILAMANI SAHOO

MAHAPATRA NILAMANI SAHOO (Mahāpātra Nīlamaṇi Sāhū, b. 1926), teacher, editor, novelist and raconteur par excellence, has dominated the Oriya literary scene for almost three decades. His themes are chosen from everyday issues and experiences in life. The most striking feature of Sahoo's stories is his ability to guide his readers through the chaos of ordinary experiences, to arrive at certain metaphysical truths that are universal and timeless. He uses the language of the common man, successfully exploiting its evocative potency and the nuances latent in words, thereby endowing it with a special vigour and freshness. Prolific as he is, Sahoo has so far published two novels, twenty volumes of short stories and eleven essay collections. He is a recipient of awards from the Orissa Sahitya Akademi and Central Sahitya Akademi.

Kāla Kālasya Kāruṇya (Eternal Grief) gives us a delightful account of a man constantly harassed by the marauding exploits of a neighbour's tomcat, and who ultimately comes to face the eternal puzzle of life and death, both inexplicable and intractable. He sees the limitations of a mortal being and feels humbled before the secret designs of a mysterious and hidden fate.

'No! I must put him out of existence, I must cut up his legs into bits! I can only stop when I have reduced his head to pulp! No! No more! Let no one pity him any more. I forgave him so often. Today I must draw his blood. Go you! Killing life! As if he were a living thing and I cared for it! What a petty life he has. . . . Yes, how petty. . . . If only I could find him here! Where has the rascal gone? Let me get at him!'

Brahmananda ground his teeth, hit his palms, and the choler mounted to his head. He reddened like a flame. He was mad with rage. Stick in hand, he rushed out to annihilate the enemy.

It was only natural that he should be in a rage. Indeed, how much longer could he have borne it? It was beyond limits.

Only last year he had bought that trained pet mynah from Hamid Khan. The bird could talk. Hamid Khan had taught it '*Allah ho Akbar*'. In its tender voice the little mynah lisped every morning, 'Allah ho. . . .' It carried to a distance very sweetly like the soft, nasal lisps of a little baby girl. The neighbours, his own priest and his wife, all complained. 'Turn this ill-omened Muslim bird out of the house. It deafens our ears from early morning. Shall we listen to the names of our gods or to these Muslim cries?'

To Brahmananda Babu however, the bird's early morning prayers appeared indeed sweet. The Lord's prayer in an unknown language coming from the mouth of a bird appeared like sweet ambrosia. It melted his heart, and he said to his wife, 'Only try to understand the words of the mynah. Everything will then appear right. It says, "God is great, only God is great." The language is different but that is the meaning.'

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The wife refused to be reasoned with. She could not tolerate Allah. She did not mind Akbar, but Allah could not be Krishna! What is Allah compared to Krishna—who is flower-bedecked, adorned with peacock feathers and *kadamba* blossoms, possessor of the three graceful curves, the divine flute-player who lifted the Govardhana hill, the moon of the *gopis* and the beloved of Radha? What was Allah compared to him? Don't try to teach me the *sastra*! I know what is what.

It is not really that, she said. The Devil has now got into his head. Otherwise, how could he who did his three ritual prayers, who studied the Gita and the Bhagavata, whose heart thrills to the legends of Krishna, down whose eyes trickle tears of rapture—how could he give up everything and embrace the Oriya Koran-sherif? Muslim books collected from everywhere are lying in heaps, and he studies them day and night! He makes notes and Muslim friends arrive one after another! And finally this Hamid Khan has completely turned his head by teaching the mynah Muslim prayers and giving it to him. If it is not to convert him to Islam what else is it? And look at him, the same unbounded devotion! But he does not know whom he should worship and whom not to! It's an unbalanced mind, I am sure.

Alright, Hamid Khan. I will see how you dare make my Hindu gods Muslim!

Nirupama could never defeat her husband in argument. Can any husband be overcome by argument? It can be done in a different way, however, and Nirupama knew the way. Many a time she had put him in his place, and now she tried to do the same. Whenever her husband was away she gave all attention to the mynah. She started teaching the bird with all her will, earnestness and concentration. 'Say, "Krishna, ho my saviour, be my saviour, my saviour".'

But the mynah could not learn it. She could only teach it to say 'Krishna'. She thought, the Muslim took away its religion when it was still young. How can the beef-eater roll the name of Krishna on his tongue! From then on, whenever nobody was looking, she mixed the scared basil in its food and a little of cowdung in its drink. After that, many days after that, the mynah uttered one word. In nasal sounds, in the lisp of a little baby girl, the bird indistinctly cried, 'Krishna'.

And now Nirupama Devi's heart was filled with gladness. Where there had been resentment before there was now affection for the mynah. She became devoted to it. Every day she bathed it in yellow turmeric water, softly brushed its feathers, kissed its beak and was thrilled by its song of Krishna. This occupied all her day. Brahmananda Babu was delighted, not so much because the mynah could now say 'Krishna', but because his wife had become so much attached to his pet bird.

Brahmananda Babu was an engineer. From boyhood days his inclinations were towards science. But he had an equal interest in religious scriptures and bird-rearing. Even as a boy he was drawn to birds. Science, god

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and birds, these three became three aspects of one interest in his mind. He was always curious and inquisitive, always drawn to the skies and unknown regions. But among these his intense love of birds was the most marked. From his boyhood he had reared birds. He was almost mad about them. He had parted with his books, his clothes, his pocket money and even his gold ring for birds. He had kept birds of every kind—mynahs, hoopoes, nightingales, blackbirds, house sparrows, crow-pheasants, king-crows, orioles, cuckoos, even owlets, young crows, and hawks. He had reared them in cages. He did not select or choose. Whatever bird he could get became his pet. He now had even swans, geese, barnyard fowl, and he had them not so much for their eggs, but just to satisfy his longing for birds. But the pity was the birds did not stay long in his cages. Some died, some escaped, some were eaten by the cats or dogs. It was so always.

In fact, long ago, as soon as he had joined the science classes in the college as a student, he had decided to build an aviary and spend his whole life in the study of birds. Really, birds are wonderful! They can fly. They have wings. They are the winged travellers of the sky. In their wings is the tremor of the skies, in their beaks the call of the heavens, in their hearts the inspiration of the firmament. They carry earth's message to the Void, and bring back its whispers to the earth.

But the birds did not get on well with his birth planets. It did not matter whether the bird was the swan, the carrier of Saraswati or Garuda, the bearer of Vishnu. Though they have always excited him and he has reared them with great care always, as if by destiny, they left him in an untimely manner and filled his heart with great sorrow.

Now the mynah had the same fate. After Nirupama Devi taught it to sing 'Krishna', they saw a strange thing happen. At dawn the bird started singing 'Allah ho Akbar' and immediately after that, 'Krishna ho Akbar', 'Krishna ho Akbar', 'Krishna ho. . . .' This delighted Brahmananda Babu more than it astonished him. Strangely, even Nirupama Devi was pleased. The joining of Allah with Krishna appeared to her as if the bird was singing 'Radha, you are great, Krishna, you are great.' Allah no longer sounded harsh or outlandish to her. It even sounded sweet, as it had once sounded sweet to her in the prayer, 'Iswar and Allah are Thy names.'

Brahmananda Babu was pleased that his wife was happy. On his bed one morning, breathing the pure air filled with the cool autumnal perfumes, he listened with rapture to the mynah's 'Allah ho . . . Krishna ho Akbar.' To his wife, still in his arms, he said, 'Do you know what the bird is saying?'

Her voice trembling with love and devotion, she said, 'Radha is great, Krishna is great.'

Pleased, Brahmananda Babu said, 'You will understand this great secret. The bird is saying, "O Thou Unmanifest, Thou art great: O Thou

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Manifest, Thou art great too."' And he kissed her. She wished in her heart that the great God would give the mynah long life.

Whether God had so granted long life to the mynah, we do not know. Anyway, the rest of its life as well as the bird itself was swallowed up by Charan Rao's notorious cat.

That day Nirupama Devi bathed the mynah as usual in yellow turmeric water, gently brushed it and longingly held it in her arms. Who else was there whom she could fondle! Their eldest son was an engineer in Madras. Their younger son was studying medicine at Berhampur. Their daughter was doing her M.A. at Cuttack. How else could she have spent her afternoons? She held the mynah in her arms, swinging it and kissing its beak. She said, 'Who is greater, Radha or Krishna?' In reply the bird only turned its neck and squinted and twittered.

Nirupama Devi laughed.

'Truly, even the great sages have not been able to give the answer. How can you, a mere little flying bird, say. True, who knows the answer! Who knows?'

The weather was pleasant, soft, temperate and very delightful. Nirupama Devi was lost in her affection for the mynah, and when her soft palms slid down its wings the bird squirmed, got calm again and twittered.

Behind the rice bags sat Charan Rao's cat with his legs drawn close, watching the scene. In his eyes were the all-consuming flames of Time. His nostrils breathed the winds of Death. He was waiting, biding his time. He was holding his murderous desire on leash. His every limb was tense, ready for the move, but he lay still with the quiet of a coiled snake. Only the tip of his tail showed any movement, fearful and unearthly, yet curious and mysterious like the moving tongue of concentrated death—horrible ghastly alertness—like the moving pulse of final destruction.

The tomcat sat waiting thus while Nirupama Devi caressed the mynah. In a tender voice she was saying, 'Say, little bird, who is greater, Radha or Krishna?' And the mynah kept twittering and crooning. It fluttered between her soft loving palms, while its every movement was imaged in the murderous greedy mirror of the tomcat's eyes.

All of a sudden the mynah slipped between her hands, unwittingly flew into the courtyard and settled on the floor. It had hardly started bending its neck and preening between its legs when Death's waiting agent suddenly struck like lightning and it was forever silenced.

The cat vanished with the mynah in its mouth. Nirupama Devi was paralyzed. She stared foolishly. She could not even shout, couldn't even realize what had happened so suddenly. She was stunned like one whose companions are struck by lightning.

Brahmananda Babu returned home late that evening. He heard the story, but remained calm. True, the mynah's sudden death left him sad. But death is the natural end of all life; moreover, his birth planets didn't favour birds, he knew. This thought comforted him to some extent but he

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was angry with the cat. He was angry with the instrument of death rather than with the fact of death. It seemed to him that if he could only lay his hands on the tomcat, he would not let him go without a lesson. His anger was growing and he became conscious of it. But slowly a reaction also started in him. By a long-standing habit he restrained himself and tried to absolve the cat of his sin. He tried to explain to the cat: 'Look here. It was not right of you. No, it's not that you killed and ate my pet mynah. No, it is the killing of a tender, helpless, little, unwary mynah by surprise to satisfy your greed for blood, that was terribly unjust. Do you think it is not unjust? O, yes. You sinned horribly. Listen. Why do you have this beastly greed? Wild cats, weasels, tigers, hyenas and jackals, they are different. They have always been in the wilds, and they do not understand non-violence. They have no alternative to killing for food. But, you tomcat, you have for thousands of years lived with man. You have wandered with him, you have lain in his bed, you have learnt to eat his food. You have received his tenderness. Occasionally you get fish and meat too. Then why do you continue this wild practice? Look, it is only your greed, and not your appetite that you satisfy. The tiger and the hyena have no such greed. They only kill to satisfy their hunger. But you cats sin horribly. Alright, what is to be done now? Such accidents often occur. But now, tomcat, learn something from man. Let your good sense prevail. Make an effort. Correct your action. Improve your soul. It is your good fortune that you are living with men. Only make an attempt and you will soon see that your spirit will blossom forth! Go, little tomcat, the hearth is warm, go.'

Thus in his heart he preached the moral law to the cat. His mind was now peaceful and he slowly overcame his unnecessary attachment to the mynah and the sorrow for its loss. Nirupama Devi, nevertheless, pined away for the bird. The sight of the empty cage brought tears to her eyes on many afternoons.

Days passed. The yearning for birds was in Brahmananda Babu again. While returning from office one day he saw a man carrying several bird-cages slung across his shoulder. There were parrots in them. He stopped his car and examined the parrots in the cages. They were all green except for a ribbon-like red bar on their necks. They carry the greenness of the cultivated fields and the deep blue colour of the tropical vegetation high into the heaven. They carry the vital green message of the earth's greenery to the ears of the heavenly spirits and in return for their affection the spirits have touched their necks with red. Wild nature is consoled at the sight of them. They symbolize the hopes and faith of all that is green and beautiful. Brahmananda Babu was delighted to see them.

He bought a parrot and put it in the empty cage. Nirupama Devi too was charmed. She would not feel lonely any more. In the afternoon she could now teach the parrot to sing of Krishna. And the parrot would learn quickly, she was sure. She caressed the parrot and fed it.

'It is a good parrot', she said. 'What do you think I should teach it?'

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'You can teach it the name of Christ', Brahmananda Babu said.

Nirupama Devi was vexed. 'What has come over you? Why should I teach it the name of Christ? Have you now gone over to Christianity?'

In fact Brahmananda Babu had these past days been reading the Bible and other Christian literature, and his mind was full of his reading. He replied, 'Christ was the son of God. So was your Krishna.'

'How can that be?' she cried. 'Why, Krishna is God Himself!'

Brahmananda Babu smiled and said, 'O, that Krishna was of Dwaraka. But the Krishna of the gopis was only a child, son of Nanda, son of Jasoda. There was only sweetness and love as you have for children. Where is that richness to make him God?'

She took a further step and said, 'Don't you know that the Krishna of Dwaraka and the Krishna of the gopis are one? Aren't the beloved of Radha and the beloved of Rukmini the same?'

Brahmananda Babu gave the final decision, 'So too said Jesus—my father and I are one.'

The discussion stopped there. It was decided that the parrot should learn to sing both 'Krishna' and 'Christ' every morning.

From that day Nirupama Devi began to teach the parrot to sing the names of Christ and Krishna. The parrot, however, pronounced the two names alike. In its nasal tone the two names sounded the same. Nevertheless Nirupama Devi had a mind to teach the two lines so that it might say, 'Protect me, O Christ; Save me, O Krishna.'

Maybe in a few days the bird would have learnt the two words, 'Protect' and 'Save'. Though it pronounced the two names alike, it might have uttered the verbs differently. But Charan Rao's tomcat did not let it. Again and again he came and prowled under the cage with covetous eyes meowing occasionally. His mouth salivated. He twitched his tail, puffed his neck, but ran away when Nirupama Devi or Brahmananda Babu came in. This went on for quite a time.

During the *Puja* holidays Brahmananda Babu's young daughter returned from her college. She was no less pleased to see the parrot. She too had a liking for birds. One day she took the parrot out of the cage and petted it for a while. Then, nobody knows why, she took a pair of scissors and clipped half of its wings. After she had petted it again a while she returned it to the cage. Inside, the parrot beat its half-clipped wings and circled round and round. It hit the bars in an effort to escape. The door of the cage had somehow come loose, and the girl had not noticed it. Suddenly the door opened and as the unlucky bird tried to fly up on its broken wings, it dropped to the ground. Charan Rao's tomcat sprang at it but missed. The parrot fluttered its torn wings and ran round in circles, screaming in fear. As soon as Nirupama Devi and her daughter saw what had happened they rushed at the cat, shouting. They should have run for the parrot. They might have then lifted it to safety and the cat, finding the two coming near the parrot, would have run away in disappointment and

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fear. But they chased the cat instead, which running straight, picked up the unlucky parrot and jumped away across the compound wall and disappeared. Nirupama Devi and her daughter wept aloud. That night they could not eat their food. Full of grief, they went to bed. Brahmananda Babu was away on tour.

He returned five days after the unfortunate incident. Nirupama Devi and her daughter could not decide how to reveal the tragedy to him. Wiping their eyes, they received him. But they were surprised when Brahmananda Babu greeted them smilingly with a nightingale in a small wooden cage.

'Look at this', he said. 'I have brought it from the woods of Nayagarh—a beautiful fighting bird. And he sings wonderfully too, when the spring comes—*kooik, kooik, akooik akooik*, . . . at times *kyukulu kou, kyukulu kou*. This is called a nightingale, a particular type. Look at its breast, how red! You may call it little robin redbreast. Now look at its crest, it is bulbul, the fighter. We can call it the crested bird. A crest like the one in the sepoy's turban. And here are two long hairs like whiskers on either side of its beak. How tiny, yet how majestic, and how delicate again!'

Nirupama Devi and her daughter listened in silence. How could they communicate their loss? Brahmananda Babu continued, 'Do you know what it eats? Not rice and milk of course. No. Grapes, pears, pomegranate seeds, bananas or the juice of guava. Very fastidious bird, this! These birds need to be treated like princes. They won't stay in cages. Put a collar round its neck or a silver ring round its leg, and fix a thin long chain to the collar or the ring, and let it rest on the bar. Hang a bunch of grapes or bananas or half-peeled pomegranates. It will eat them and sing.'

The enchantment of the bulbul was visible in his eyes, lips and ears. Obviously he was excited. He passed the cage on to his wife and took out a bunch of grapes from the basket. There was a bunch of bananas and lots of ripe guavas. He handed them all to his daughter and went in for a bath.

The mother and the daughter had no heart to break the news of the tragedy—nor was there a suitable occasion during the night. After his bath Brahmananda Babu said his prayers, had a light dinner and soon went to bed. He was quite exhausted. He instructed his daughter to put the bulbul's cage on his bedroom-shelf instead of hanging it near the parrot's cage. 'In the morning we will decide where to put it', he said.

That night the mother and the daughter went to bed in silent grief.

The music of the bird ushered in the morning. Brahmananda Babu jumped out of his bed in delight. His daughter was still asleep, but Nirupama had got up. The song of the bulbul was indeed extremely sweet and it cheered Brahmananda Babu's heart. He took the cage and came outside. Behind him followed Nirupama, her heart pounding and her throat parched with fear. Brahmananda Babu saw the empty cage hanging between two big crotons and cried out.

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'Niru, what's happened to the parrot?' Nirupama stammered. She could not look at the face of her husband. She looked away towards the bulbul and in a feeble voice said, 'That same tomcat' . . . Brahmananda Babu roared—'Charan Rao's tomcat?'

'Yes.'

Just then the bulbul sang once more—'*Quikulikao, quikulikao, kooik, kooik, kyooo.* . . .' It somewhat dampened Brahmananda Babu's anger.

'This tomcat is going to annihilate all of us! Oh curse me, that I should have such luck! Oh God!'

He didn't have much time to go on with his grief. He now devoted himself to the bulbul. A thick wire was fixed in the courtyard with grapes and bananas hanging from it. A thin, long chain was attached to the bird's collar and was tied to the wire. The bulbul lived in a somewhat free atmosphere. It could flutter and fly about four to five feet vertically and round the wire. For a long time Brahmananda Babu watched its movements from a distance. The bulbul was never still. It always hopped from one end of the wire to the other, fluttering its wings—flying a few feet up and down, this side and that, at times pecking at the fruits and again sitting up, proud like a wrestler, throwing a challenge for a fight.

Engrossed deep in the activities of the bulbul, Brahmananda Babu could forget the parrot. But he could not stay there for long. Soon he had to leave on some official work.

For about seven or eight days the bulbul remained safe. But Charan Rao's tomcat had tasted the blood of Brahmananda Babu's birds. He too had developed a great interest in birds. Every night he intently watched the bird from under the wire, for during the day there was no opportunity. He used to pass that way looking at the bird with feigned indifference and with an occasional '*mianiew*'.

He didn't have a chance, for the bird was quite agile and alert. Getting at it was only a remote possibility. Still the tomcat didn't give up hope. Charan Rao's tomcat was crazy about Brahmananda Babu's birds but there was no chance for him. He had only a greedy tongue, and an uncontrollable desire on the one hand and ruthless animal willpower on the other. Equipped with these two forces he kept on longing for the bulbul.

But how long can a feeble bulbul thrive against the tremor of the tremendous seven-day-long murderous willpower of Charan Rao's tomcat? He could not continue longer. That afternoon he restlessly kept flying in all directions. Only the thin chain held him back. After a while the unlucky, tired bird dropped down. But its wings had somehow got entangled in the chain and it could not fly up. The wire was five feet high above and it could not reach it. The struggling bird kept hanging from the chain.

Then on came the living messenger of Death—the tomcat—Charan Rao's tomcat. Slowly advancing with quiet, cautious steps, his cruel, steady eyes shooting out flames of death, he leaped into space. The bird was

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hanging three feet above the ground. With more than half of the bulbul in his mouth the tomcat vanished.

That day Brahmananda Babu could not contain himself. His blood boiled in fury. He forgot all divine feelings. He was conscious of his inhuman anger. But this consciousness only made him doubly furious. He became pale with anger, blind with rage. He must destroy Charan Rao's tomcat, anyhow, at any cost, without any regard for sin. He was determined. With a raised stick in his hand he announced, 'Listen, everybody. If I do not kill this wicked tomcat before sunset I am not coming back home. This I swear thrice.'

Nirupama trembled in fear and sorrow at this violent determination of her husband. But she could not utter a word.

Brahmananda Babu's nerves became tense in anger—today he will batter the tomcat to death. Three times true, he will. He will bring death to Death himself. He will strangle Death. He will completely annihilate the infernal, cruel, greedy, ruthless embodiment of Death.

Where is that tomcat? Charan Rao's tomcat? Show him to me! Like one possessed, the enraged Brahmananda Babu ran in all directions to seek out the tomcat. He could not find him in the house. He went inside Charan Rao's house and saw his wife ironing the clothes. The cat was not there. He headed towards the sand-hills—big and small sand-dunes with shrubby growths in between. Here at times he had seen the tomcat watching for mice.

But where had the tomcat gone? Brahmananda Babu's breath was aggravated because he could not find him. His whole body was trembling in anger. He ran all round the sand-hills, searched through the casuarina and deodar groves. No, he was not even there. He went to the fishermen's colony. The smell of fish at times lured the tomcat there. By the side of a damaged brick stack something looked like a cat. With guarded steps Brahmananda Babu advanced with his stick raised to hit. He knew he must control his excitement and rage and be guarded and careful to kill the cunning, wicked cat. With careful aim and with all the force of his wrath, he struck. But the cat was too quick and he missed it. With doubled rage he followed it for a while when suddenly he realized his mistake. It was not Charan Rao's cat. It was a white pussycat, a female cat! The tomcat was brown and ugly. His anger had made him forget the colour of the tomcat!

The sun was about to set. But no sight of the tomcat. Brahmananda Babu was tired. But his anger and vengeance remained unabated. From the fishermen's colony he came along the seashore. A little ahead of him was the shack of a mad woman who lived there all by herself, unwanted and uncared for. Her limbs resembled thin long sticks and her belly protruded. You could count the ribs of her chest. From it hung a pair of sacks of withered skin. Her fleshless face was thin and long, the matted hair on her head falling all over her, a smear of vermilion on her forehead and wrapped round her waist was a torn cloth. Brahmananda Babu

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remembered having seen the tomcat sometimes near the mad woman's shack. He somehow felt that the tomcat was inside it. He approached the hut with quicker steps.

He was approaching the hut when suddenly he stopped dead. He trembled in horror and disgust. Right in front of him lay Charan Rao's tomcat—dead! A stone was tied round his neck!

He could not believe his eyes. But that was it! He knew Charan Rao's tomcat too well. This could not be some other cat. He looked at it closely. Yes, it was the same unfortunate tomcat, no doubt. But who could have killed him like this? Why . . . Why? Who could have thrown him into the sea with a stone round his neck—and why? How disgusting and horrible!

Brahmananda Babu's heart seemed to break. He pressed his heart with both his hands. At that moment that wretched, ill-omened mad woman came running towards him.

'Babu, what are you looking for? Is that your cat?'

'Yes, who killed it?'

'Why, I did. So what? Should I worship it? Whatever dried fish I could beg from the fishermen this cunning, greedy cat gobbled them up. It has done it every day. Now, today I have got it.' She turned towards the cat. 'Got your punishment, you curs'd cat? May your bowels burst! You have put half a dozen of my dried fish in your wretched belly, you greedy, wicked. . . .' And she directed a few kicks at the belly of the tomcat and left the place.

It was getting dark. Something tore into Brahmananda Babu's heart. He could no longer stand. He sat down on the sand.

Oh God!

And this death, how needless, how painful and how unwise! Yet, when this death needlessly and unreasonably becomes itself a victim, with a stone round its neck by the sea shore. . . . There, even the vengeful heart melts in the presence of this ugly, miserable uncalled-for death!

A foul smell wafted from the sea. The crows were active, not far from where the tomcat lay, bending their necks and beating their wings. There in their midst lay the tomcat's bloated carcass with the eyes out of their sockets, and a stone round its neck. And the eyes, bleary and out of the sockets, still fearful and horrible, yet pitiful and helpless, mysteriously innocent!

The waves of the sea were trying to lick the body of the dead cat with their greedy tongues. There in the distant horizon from beyond where the waves gathered, there rose a silent moan, a deep sigh passing far into the shore.

A deep tremor from inside his heart shook him. He looked at the dead cat again. His eyes dimmed.

It could not be Charan Rao's tomcat. It must be his own disobedient son, Brahmananda Babu thought. He had opened the door of the cage and in a spirit of mischief he had let his favourite bird fly away—the

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naughty son whom in anger he had chased with a cane and whom he would surely have thrashed without pity—yet for what?

With a stone round his neck for a petty, venial sin! With eyes protruding by the side of the sea—a stone round the neck, why, for what reason?

Oh!

Brahmananda Babu covered his face and wept loudly like a child in the desolate sands.

Kāla Kālasya Kāruṇya, 1969 *Translated by* K.M. Acharya

The Fig-Blossom

AKHIL MOHAN PATTNAIK

AKHIL MOHAN PATTNAIK (Akil Mōhan Paṭṭanāik, 1927–82) was essentially a writer of short stories and travelogues in Oriya. He dabbled in essay writing, editing and poetical compositions. Some of his stories have been translated into English and some Indian languages. His themes are contemporary and his diction polished and modern. His tales are told with an element of drama. Akhil Mohan received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981.

Dimiri Phula (The Fig-Blossom) tells us about the tragic predicament of a lonely middle-aged couple, who, unable to alter the course of a spiteful destiny, are resigned to remain the victims of delusions.

She took me for Sanjay at the first encounter. And I could not muster up enough courage to protest.

Let me relate the story right from the beginning.

At that time I was a postgraduate student at Allahabad University. I had come to Gauhati during the *Puja* vacation, holidaying. The hotel where I was staying appeared to be in one of the fashionable parts of the town. Neat rows of beautiful houses stood there, off the pavements, on both sides of the road, each house almost a copy of another in its architecture. Undoubtedly they reflected the owners' taste for modernity. But at times the repetitive pattern of the houses appeared rather tiresome and dull to the onlooker. It looked as though these smart houses had been lifted out of the pages of some design book and planted by the roadside. That special thing one always fondly associates with a home seemed to have been woefully forgotten while erecting these structures. So it was quite natural that I remained a stranger so far as the denizens of these houses were concerned. But then, this story is not about the houses at all, and it is time I returned to the real issue.

I had checked into one of the hotels in this fashionable locality. That evening, I was leisurely walking back to my room when it suddenly got

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dark and thunder clouds gathered in the sky, ushering in high winds and rain. When the large drops of rain fell from above I knew it wouldn't be easy to cover even the short distance to the hotel. Since there was hardly anything else I could do, I broke into a stride and practically ran to the nearest house for shelter. Any other time, one would have felt a little hesitant about the *durwan* at the entrance or feared the lurking Alsatian within the premises before pushing open the gate; but the threat of the imminent shower was so overpowering that hardly any such thought crossed my mind at the time. I flung open the gate, rushed to the verandah and felt greatly relieved that I could save myself from getting completely drenched.

Even the verandah of the house was tastefully furnished. Four basket-chairs were strewn over the mosaic floor, which was smooth and spacious. Beneath the name-plate fashioned out of polished teak-wood, there hung against the wall, a small letterbox. On the southern side, a creeper plant had spread itself out luxuriantly over the lattice-work done in concrete. The porcelain bowls contained varieties of rare and beautiful cacti.

Outside, the rain poured down in mad fury and shafts of fiery lightning shredded the sky every now and then. But how strange; there was no sign of anyone living in this sprawling bungalow. Though it was too much to think of a strain of music from a radio or the jingle of glassware at this particular moment, it was not entirely illogical to expect someone to come hurriedly to shut the doors and windows of the house. But there was no one and no sound anywhere. The fine curtain at the front door errantly fluttered and flew in the gusty wind; one could see through the open entrance a few books and magazines lying scattered all over the drawing room, their leaves flapping as they tossed from one corner to the other. It sounded as if a flock of pigeons was fluttering about there, all the time trying to get out of the room, yet meeting with no success.

The rain lashed outside; its sound, the cacophony of a large dance-hall ensemble vigorously orchestrating in unison. At a distance, I could see the droplets splashing down in sparkles, blazing like shiny shafts of spears before they splattered into tiny silvery particles on contact with the pools of water beneath the lamp-post.

A very large black limousine entered the gates at high speed and screeched to a halt as it braked hard under the portico. Its glowering head-lamps remained fully ablaze even after it had stopped and I found myself standing there in full vision before the glare of the light and feeling very awkward indeed. I was there, like the son of the *kotwal* in some fairy tale, who had lost his way in the jungle at night, and in wandering about looking for the safety of some shelter, had unwittingly blundered into the den of a monster.

As the head-lamps were switched off, darkness came surging forward to swallow the whole setting.

Loudly and very excitedly, a woman called out from the car, 'Ah! Sanjay, is that you. . . .' Then I got the first opportunity to see the woman

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who had got down from the car and led me into the well-lit interior of the house. She must have been around forty years of age. But there was no doubt that she took much care of her physique and form to continue looking young and beautiful. We stood there in the well-lit room looking at each other, but neither spoke a word. Then, as I was preparing in my mind to tell her that she had definitely made a mistake in taking me for Sanjay, she spoke without waiting for me to say anything: 'Nothing seems to have changed with you Sanjay; you look to me verily the same self that I saw last.' Then she called the cook and ordered coffee. 'I do remember it well, you don't relish tea. See, parents invariably remember the little things about their children. But can *you* tell me how many spoonfuls of sugar I like in my cup of tea?'

I thought it prudent to remain silent rather than blurt out what could certainly be a wild guess. But within this short time I felt there had come a queer pensiveness into her eyes that made them stare vacantly.

She leaned a little against the back of the couch and said, 'I guess, I know it Sanjay, that at this stage of life you are in, it won't be very normal for you to remember things about us. But what about Manju? How demanding do you think her research work would be? Couldn't she find some time in the last five years to come over and look us up, even once? How could you manage it yourself then? The other day her father told me that he had already mailed the return air ticket to her. But the holidays are about to end and there is no sign of her coming home.'

I sat perplexed and still. The puzzle was becoming a mess of tangled webs all around us. Any hope of escaping from here appeared rather remote, I thought, until and unless the rain subsided outside.

She continued her story. 'Manju knows well that she has to go abroad next December. Her father has almost completed the necessary formalities for the trip. After that who knows when we would meet again? In those yester-years, Manju used to be here and so were you, and how nice one felt then! I think it isn't any good when one begins to get alienated from one's parents, even if one is engrossed in academic matters all the while.' Her eyes looked stern and her voice sounded strained. 'I could stop Manju's allowance any day and press her to come back. But Sanjay, such a thing is never done; after all, I am her Mama.' The fury of the rain had abated a little. I could clearly hear the sound of water dripping down from the cornice. I looked at my watch once more to indicate that it was time for me to go back. I apologized for leaving early but then I was expected to be on time to keep my appointment with a friend. On the point of my departure she enquired where I had lodged myself in the town and I told her that I was staying at the Tea View Hotel, in Room 24, and it was just over there, down the road, as you cut across the corner. She was about to say something more but before she could do that, I had already started going down the steps.

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Once more she interposed, 'No, you won't be left walking all the way when it is still raining.' There was a note of authority in her voice now. 'Get into the car; the chauffeur will drive you down to your place; he must know the location of the hotel.' I had to get into the vehicle and for the length of time I sat in the car, I struggled hard within myself to stifle all my curiosity about the lady and her family.

It was the morning of the day after. The hotel bearer had deposited the pot of tea by the bedstead. Then I heard knuckles tapping on the door and thereafter the words, 'May I come in.' I gathered myself a bit and said, 'Please do.' An elderly looking man came into my room. One look at him and one would unmistakably conclude that he had grown old rather prematurely under the scourge of some deep sorrow. The *dhoti* and *panjabi* he had on him and the way he carried the walking stick in his hand showed a kind of aristocratic distinctiveness about him. He rubbed the thick lenses of the spectacles a few times with his handkerchief and put them on. He placed the walking stick against the chair and looked me over very thoroughly.

I motioned him towards the chair. And he started speaking quickly as soon as he sat down. 'I knew my wife had fallen into a very serious deception. Incidentally, that was my house where you sought shelter from the rain last evening and the lady there is my wife. She practically goaded me to come here this morning. She feels definite that you could be none other than Sanjay.'

I was very apologetic and said, 'Won't you listen to me please? I am Ashok, I am so sorry for all that happened last evening. Perhaps I became very reticent and could not really tell her that, after all, I wasn't her Sanjay; because I found her so overwhelmingly affectionate.' He said, 'I must say that physically you look uncannily so much like Sanjay. Perhaps one could know that you are not Sanjay only when one looks at you closely. But I do not see anything amiss in it for which you should be ashamed and apologetic.' He continued, 'Dear Ashok, it is the irony of my fate, and a very cruel one at that, indeed I must say. At one time the marriage of my daughter Manju with Sanjay was practically fixed. But then that was not destined to be!' His voice had choked and he sat motionless, his unblinking eyes staring vacantly at some corner of the teapoy. I poured out a cup of tea and put it in his hand. He lifted the cup to his lips absentmindedly, without any change to his stance, and said, 'There is no point in telling you all this now. But then, I found my wife brimming with joy last night and she has never looked so happy in a long time. After she saw you, she thinks that her sole dream is about to become a reality. I won't wreck her dream world. Besides, what more could I wish for her, other than to let her live well, if she could, the rest of her life blissfully cocooned within the shell of her illusion!'

He lapsed into silence after he had told me this. He appeared engrossed in some dialogue with himself. He removed the spectacles, wiped his

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eyes with the handkerchief and continued, 'Considering your age, you are almost young enough to be my son. I could call you Ashok. Oh no, no, you'll be Sanjay from now on. I mustn't be caught unawares, at some unguarded moment; that would shatter the fantastic delusion of my wife. Listen to me Sanjay, from now on you will have only one identity in relation to my family and that is of Sanjay. And there is just one favour more that I should beg of you—well, it isn't really begging, perhaps it could be a kind of legitimate claim; hereafter, you must keep visiting us at intervals. In money matters never have we felt any constraints in the past, nor do we fear any such thing happening to us now. But I expect you will fill the only void in our lives that is still left gaping.' The pathos in his voice was too palpable to be mitigated by words.

'Won't you promise me, Sanjay, that you will come here from time to time, your personal difficulties notwithstanding, to play-act the role of Sanjay?'

I was feeling greatly disturbed and blurted, 'Please, you have my word for it, I shall be coming. You may rest assured.'

He looked visibly relieved of some great sorrow that held his heart in its grip.

'Well then, I heard that you are flying out to Delhi this evening. My wife will be sending something for Manjushree with you. Both of us will be there at the airport to see you off. I must leave you now, I should not be wasting your time any more.' I saw him off at the door and returned to my room.

In the departure lounge I was impatiently looking for the mysterious couple. Suddenly I felt his hand mildly pressing my shoulder and he greeted me with, 'Hello, Sanjay.' My response was a rather startled one. There she stood by his side, his wife, the lady of my chance encounter last evening, the very image of affection. She handed over a small packet to me and spoke in immaculate English, 'This is for Manju. Am sure you won't mind the trouble after all.'

I accepted the packet from her with all courtesy. On the top of it, there were only the letters, 'M A N J U', beautifully scribed with some felt-tipped writing instrument. The metallic voice over the loudspeakers requested the passengers to proceed to the aircraft. She relaxed her mild hold of my left hand and released it.

I took the gentleman a little away and spoke to him very softly. 'I am afraid I don't really know where Miss Manju lives in Delhi. If you could write down her address on the packet, it would be helpful.' I have never before seen a pair of human eyes growing so lifeless and still. His eyes had glazed into two glass beads as it were. Then the ageing frame of his body convulsed and contorted a few times as he broke into a bout of wild laughter. He brought himself still closer to me and mumbled into my ear, 'Even I wouldn't know Manju's address myself. She died many years ago in

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a railway accident and that was a little after my wife lost her sanity. To this day she hasn't been told anything about it. Manju studied in the third year at college then. Today, three years after her death, it is imperative that she should remain preoccupied with research work, and thereafter, she must go abroad for further research and more. . . .'

The propellers of the plane had taken to spinning and the noise they produced was deafening. The metallic voice over the loudspeakers crackled out my name again and again. I ran up the flight of steps in the ladder to get into the aircraft quickly. I only looked back once, from the middle of the ladder there, and they appeared to me like a pair of human rag-dolls, lonesome and accursed in this cruel universe, locked into each other in a waltz, with their hands lifted towards the firmament.

Dimiri Phula *Translated by* Saratchandra Satapathy

Niagara and Devajani

KRUSHNA PRASAD MISHRA

KRUSHNA PRASAD MISHRA (Kruṣṇa Prasād Miśra, b. 1933), noted Oriya fiction-writer, was educated in India and Canada. After his return from Toronto University, he wrote a number of short stories effectively depicting the problems of culture-shock. Some of the stories have been translated into other Indian languages and English. He has published two books of children's literature, ten volumes of short stories, three books of fiction, a travelogue and three books of essays on philosophical, human and social issues. Krushna Prasad received the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985. Currently he is Professor of Philosophy in the Postgraduate Department of Philosophy, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar.

Niagara O Devajani, set against the backdrop of western culture and an alien milieu, dramatizes the felt emotions of an Indian father, inextricably caught in the cross-currents of two powerful and vastly different cultures. The inimitable autobiographical narrative style of Krushna Prasad heightens the poignancy and pathos of the story.

The Niagara was before us, fierce yet beautiful. It was shining like a four-day-old crescent on the forehead of Shiva, the self-created one.

Niagara had the shape of such a crescent, a barely four-day-old one.

Pavanah, Pavatam asmi
Ramah, Sastrabhtam aham
jhasanam makaras Casmi
śrotasam asmi Jāhnavi

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'Of purifiers I am the wind; of the wielders of weapon I am Rama; of fishes I am the Shark, and of rivers I am the Ganges.'

Who is Janhabi? Who is Niagara?

There are a million manifestations of that eternal Beauty. Nachiketa and I offered it our obeisance, our hearts throbbing with reverence. The deep-blue Niagara leapt forward down from her rocky bed with glee. Where to? And what for? Rambling questions only. There won't be any particular meaning to the cosmic dance of Nataraj. But certainly there would be the Beauty. Every rhythmic beat of the dancing feet creates a million worlds. There would be the heavenly music in the staccato beat. Ha Ha . . . Ho Ho Hee Hee—it was the laughter of the Niagara, the relentless mirth of the fast-flowing water. There rose a hundred million water drops, white as jasmine buds. There was the smell of the flowers, the coolness of the vapoury particles, it had the taste of nectar. Time stood still, perplexed, with bated breath. The gods and goddesses were lost in the revelry of joy; there floated flake-coloured clouds against the sky. As though the Ganga had come clad in the blue apparel of the Niagara to pay homage to Lord Shiva. It was the time of creation, the hour of joyous play of the Supreme Player, the intense moment of blissful togetherness.

Her blue apparel had spread to the skies. Unclad Niagara shone like one carved out of a piece of white marble. Niagara's bosom swelled—like the swollen bosom of the women with the drums on the wall of Konarak temple—just before she took the plunge. It swelled with the suppressed desires of countless births, her wishes, her imagination.

Ah! This is the place of creation. This must be the place for the union of Shiva and Parvati.

'*Om Namah Śivāya!*'

Nachiketa and I offered our obeisance again. The few tourists closeby were looking at us quizzically. They had a lot in their mind to say, only they were hesitant and shy to do so. After some moments they would be busy taking snapshots of the Niagara. Yashica, Konica, Fuji, Agfa—the films had to be exposed before a particular hour. A mild admonition to the wife, instructing her to lean slightly against the railing, 'not so much, take it easy—alright'. Now you could smile, 'smile please'—click. 'Next boys! Hurry up to Mum, better snap it up.' It was getting late, 'gotta get back to Buffalo.' The children raced, they posed with the monogram of twist-dance on their hawai in-shirts—click. Everything was routine, measured, pre-planned. Two hours at the Niagara and one roll of film to be exposed. A stop-over for forty-five minutes at the hotel and only two hours drive to be home thereafter.

The wife ought to be called 'darling' or 'honey', the beloved to be addressed 'baby' or some such name, God holds his sway inside the church and the world lies sprawling around beyond that; that has not a thing to do with God. Beloved remained beloved, wife continued to be wife, Niagara was the same Niagara and Jesus Christ himself. Everything

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was different from every other thing. All things found their own perspectives in definite order. Everything had its own contour cast in the mould.

Nachiketa and I lazed on the grass, a few yards away from the highway. Rows of the Florida-type Wagelia plant stood behind Nachiketa, a bed of pink spiraea was closeby. They were all in blossom.

'Nachiketa, come to the front please, a little away from the plants.' Nachiketa moved closer. There was the parking lot at a small distance. Hundreds of cars stood in the area, arranged in neat rows. It looked festive everywhere. Everyone was out to enjoy himself. After a spell of shooting the Niagara, one only scanned vacantly faces, forms, bosoms or fashion, or entered a restaurant for a cup of coffee or to munch some snacks.

We two, I and my only child Nachiketa, were the exceptions. I explained to Nachiketa the vision of an enlightened Indian. 'Our humble offering was not meant only for this Niagara that had so much of measurable length, breadth and height. We paid homage, our love, our respect, to the eternal Beauty that is manifest in the form of this fall. God is the repository of all that is beautiful and is seen—at dawn and at dusk—in the emerald blue of the vast expanse, the skies, in the myriad constellations of the shining heavenly bodies. God is not bound within the confines of a temple, mosque, church or synagogue. The day they were founded marked the beginning of the craze to confine the limitless, and desecrate what was truly beautiful. There was no temple for the *rishis*, Christ had no need for a church, and Mohammed never wanted any mosque.'

Nachiketa, my thirteen-year-old lad, was trying hard to understand what I said. I could see Devajani in his face. He wore Devajani's nose, he had even her dental pattern in him. Devajani was dead, but while she was alive she liked Nachiketa to hear me talk on the philosophy of my life, and when I stopped tired she would say, 'Begin tomorrow where you have left it off today. I shall think over all that you have said, I shall have questions for you. I love to hear when you talk!'

Devajani was intelligent. I had to think hard and deep to answer her questions. Once she had asked, 'Do you think that the grandeur of the sea and the beauty of men and women belong to the same category?' She had argued that they did not.

Devajani listened to me, she understood my philosophy, but she seldom practised what I said. She was not willing to put philosophy to everyday use in life.

Perhaps she was more devout and more practical; comparatively I proved a sinner and of course damn theoretical. I often told her, 'Jani, why do you go to the temple on festive days? What kind of godhead do you realize in that sickening jostle, when there is not even a remote possibility of your toe ever touching the temple floor? Man ought to go to the scenes of natural beauty—the sea-front, the gurgling falls in the hills, the deep and dense forests, the confluence of a river, or the pinnacle of a mountain, but never to a temple. God has His abode in those places, Jani! Not

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in your stone and cement structure, the temple and the mosque. And when the sea is so close by. . . .'

Devajani would listen quietly, she would agree with me and smile, but at the right moment she would slip out to visit the temple—on many a festive day and on all Thursdays—without ever giving me any inkling of it. I wondered at her love for the temple of Lord Jagannath, but I failed to understand her. One day I asked her, 'Devajani what do you think of me?'

Devajani replied, 'You are my God.'

'Am I a devout character or the other way? What do you take me for? A believer? An atheist?'

Devajani lapsed into a speechless silence. I got excited. I continued.

'Devajani, I am a believer even though I seldom visit a temple. I am a Shaivite, the pinnacle of Kailash-mountain is my Lingam; I am the staunchest of all Vaishnavites, the limitless spread of the ocean is my Narayana. I am the worshipper of Ganesh too. I have realized the essence of Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa, Bhababhuti and Shakespeare. I do see Lord Jagannath's merry twinkle in the limitless baffle, the Universe. . . I . . .'

Devajani kissed me to silence. She pulled me into an intense embrace and spoke agitatedly. 'Speak no more, please, there is no need for words. It matters little whether you are a believer or an atheist. You are God himself and God needs no other faith.'

One day I teased her, 'Perhaps you are some statue on the temple wall, perchance gone human. The temple seems to have become a passion with you. That makes me believe you would be one of the statuettes in the fresco upon the temple wall and experience your proximity to God, if you were to be born again.'

My words had an edge of irony to them. But Devajani had got used to my rantings. She beamed a smile and said, 'God resides in every atom. How can you think that the lifeless, the loveless, the graceless, the soulless and the ugly are without Him?'

And that was all she said. She lost herself in the daily chores of the household, leaving me transfixed. It was what I had told her a few days ago and she had sobbed in ecstasy to hear me. Her eyes sparkled with the tears of joy.

'I love him who perceives Me in everything and gets everything in Me.'

We argued frequently and disagreed more and more on the temple-or-the-sea issue after the birth of Nachiketa. She would insist on taking Nachiketa with her to the temple—on his birthday she must, and on normal days if she could. She would pray to God for him to be devout, a man of character and integrity, and to serve what is just when he grew up. I raised hurdles always, 'Why do you drag the kid into the temple? It would be much better to take him along to the sea-shore. He was born on a day when the moon was four quarters full. And on such a day the sea's grandeur is too great to be told in words. He would experience the wonder that is God's beauty over there.'

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Devajani would agree and say, 'Well! that is for the night. It is quite some time before it is dark. Let me take him around the temple after the morning rituals. The blessings of God, the good wishes of the brahmins would merit him a long life.'

She would take him to the temple even if I forbade. God knows what kept her engrossed in the temple so long. Usually it would be midday when she would be home. In the temple there would be the usual jostle, the chaos of the sick, the miserable, the poor, the unenlightened—'Bless me to win the law-suit, Bestow good health upon me, Let me have my mistress, O would I pass this examination, O God let good sense dawn upon my husband so that he would love me'—a million different supplications, the coagulation of so-called devout humans, the darkness, the din, the damp temple floor, the ugly sickening godmen and their touts—I felt nauseous to think what Devajani could be doing there in such a place. God knows the kind of cultural imprint all this would leave indelibly upon the impressionable mind of the kid. I would start a quarrel with her after she came back. If it came to a head, she would return to the temple again after she put Nachiketa to sleep. I never disturbed Nachiketa in his slumber. How could it then be possible to go to the sea-shore?

I did not pick a quarrel with Devajani on the occasion of the sixth birthday of Nachiketa. She did not go to the temple after the ceremony of putting ghee on the fire and it was amazing for me. I enquired, 'Devajani, is there anything wrong with you? Won't you go to the temple today?'

'No, I won't, for once. I am a wife and why should a wife be doing things against the wishes of her husband all her life? We will all go to the sea-shore tonight. I shall lay the table early today.'

I went mad with joy when Devajani finished. I took her into my arms, kissed her again and again. 'You will see, Devajani, the moon, the sky, the sea and the waves will welcome you in unison. These will be more splendid than ever, the moon shall shine lovelier and the breakers shall be bigger this time.' Devajani said smiling—'Don't be so excited. I am so frail and small. There is nothing in me for nature to feel elated about.' 'Devajani, it is not the world of nature that would revel at your presence for it is not animate enough. The all-pervasive presence that is God will be pulsating. God is manifest in the world of nature. He will be glad to see His devotee.'

Nachiketa was also happy when he heard of going to the beach. Certainly there was no dearth of joy in running helter-skelter on the sand to collect colourful shells.

The joy of that evening, the sense of fulfilment for the three of us, was beyond any description. Nachiketa fell asleep, tired, but we chatted together, ran aimlessly and danced in sheer ecstasy. At last we dropped down half-dead and imagined ourselves lost in the moonlight, the roar of the sea, and the shrill whisper of the sea-breeze.

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After that year, Devajani had never done things I forbade her to do. Because that very year, after that particular birthday of Nachiketa, she left me and Nachiketa for ever. She transcended the laws of obedience and disobedience. If only I knew that our differences would come to this end, I would have been careful. That was never to be. In the midst of festivity, I failed to notice that Devajani had caught cold and had been coughing a little for the last two or three days. Her constitution was such that once she caught a cold it did not get cured easily. Despite this she had taken a prolonged head-bath early in the morning because that happened to be Nachiketa's birthday.

Devajani left me and on account of that I had left her country. Her death made me rootless, gave me the life of a nomad. From the day of her death I became an emigrant. And there was Nachiketa tagged to me. How could I forget Devajani altogether?

After Devajani was gone, no one had tried to find a temple for Nachiketa; but there had never been any difficulty in celebrating his birthday. We have tried to locate the benign presence of the Almighty in the unending Swiss Alps range, in the river Rhine in France, in the wind-ravaged Pacific and at times in the eternal enigma, the sky. We have sought Heaven's benediction on the occasion of Nachiketa's birthday. We have sung in praise of Him.

This day was also Nachiketa's birthday.

The Niagara is a short distance away from Toronto. It is at best an hour or an hour-and-a-half's drive if one is on one's own.

The wind had changed in our direction. I felt cold in the onrushing haze of vapours. The evening had set in, Niagara had changed into a Benarasi sari, it seemed.

I called out for Nachiketa and looked in the direction he sat. He was not there. Where had he gone? He had left me alone when he saw me lost in my thoughts. I was worried and looked for him everywhere. The tourists had grown in number. Where was he indeed? I saw a couple running towards me from the nearby restaurant. They held hands, clasping each other's and kept running. When they entered a lighted zone I saw Nachiketa coming along with a beautiful, bronze-haired girl. The rhythm of their steps had a rising youthfulness about it and their faces beamed with an irradiating joy, a sense of fulfilment. I was beginning to get mad with Nachiketa, rather impulsively, but my memory of Devajani restrained me. Perhaps form is a kind of necessity for the human mind to savour the infinite and derive contentment. Maybe for some, God manifests Himself only in a temple.

Nachiketa spoke after he reached me, 'She is my girl-friend, Daddy. Did I not tell you about her? They came from England.'

I thought the way she looked at me, the girl was trying to read my mind. Her sweeping gaze got fixed on my flowing beard. I smiled and shook hands with her.

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'Susan Manard, I presume. Do I not remember correctly?' Susan looked at me appreciatively and said, 'In Toronto art gallery they put your paintings on an exhibition for a month beginning tomorrow, don't they?'

I smiled and said, 'Yes.'

'Daddy, Mummy and myself—we are all very interested in your paintings. We have bought tickets for tomorrow. Daddy feels that you have given the characters from Indian mythology a new dimension by integrating them inseparably with the world of nature.'

My eyes swept over the Niagara. She was busy changing into a deep blue Kashmir-silk sari from a Benarasi one. I could not decide on an answer for Susan. I remained silent.

Niagara O Debajani *Translated by* Saratchandra Satapathy

Our Auntie

SANTANU KUMAR ACHARYA

SANTANU KUMAR ACHARYA (Śāntanu Kumār Ācārya, b. 1933) is a prolific fiction-writer in Oriya. He has published eight volumes of short stories, eight books of fiction and seven volumes of children's literature. He shows the perceptive powers of a mystic poet, often discovering the uncommon and the metaphysical in the phenomenal universe of sensations and common experiences. Beginning at the base in the mundane realm of everyday reality, he rises invariably to spiritual heights, presenting a philosophical vision of the created universe. He uses the speech rhythm of the conversational idiom of Oriya language with rare verve and vivacity.

Āma Māusī (Our Auntie) illustrates his mystical perceptions about the existence of a benign spiritual quotient in the most ordinary happenings of life. To the ordinary people in the story, transcendence and spiritual experience no longer appear unattainable propositions; they become an inevitable part of human activity everywhere.

'Gopal! O, Gopal! See, my boy, there's someone out there calling.' This was the first thing we all heard from outside.

Our auntie was well over seventy. She lived a widow for long. There was a yawning gap in her life in matters relating to her sires. And she had remained the auntie, our very own auntie. But as it is, very many years had gone by—twenty years, or thirty, it could be that many possibly—ever since we met her last; and that had come to be our last meeting; indeed, our very last. That time our uncle was still alive and we were a bunch of 'little 'uns'. How on earth could we know anything about the life at our auntie's place! We had come to her village as toddlers, constantly latched to the end of our mother's sari. It was such a remote village in Sambalpur; maybe you have heard the name of Padampur in the context. One had to

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go a little farther from there. Santarapalli was its name. It was such a remote hamlet indeed! But now the village no longer had the look of what we have seen of it about twenty or thirty years ago. The roads had improved and we could see the network of power cables here and there. . . .

Light was fading steadily in the evening sky. Only after we had left Sambalpur far behind and the car reached Padampur, did I find out that we wouldn't be going any farther that day. The driver, time and again, switched off the engine and kept lifting up the bonnet of the car, before he finally declared that it would not be wise to keep going in the night. We were perforce to stay at Padampur. Then it became rather imperative that I find a *dak*-bungalow or some rest-house for us to lodge for the night. Moreover, there were the children travelling with us. A night's sojourn at Padampur had never been a part of our itinerary before. . . . It was now, as I was getting worried about where to put them up for the night, that by chance I saw that road leading to Santarapalli—I read the name on a roadside signpost and the old scene revived in my mind. We had traversed this path together: it was twenty years ago or was it thirty! It could be thirty—our mother was there ahead of us and we came in tow. . . .

'O Sumi, Kuna, Moonmoon! Let's go to auntie's house. My auntie's place is somewhere about here . . . it must be very near. Would you like to go there?' As I spoke, I vividly recollected the scene as it was then, many years ago. . . .

Of all persons, the driver came up with the suggestion, 'Sir, let us all visit auntie's house.' And as for the car, the driver juggled with the starter switch and the vehicle that had behaved so tentatively a few moments ago, rather reluctant to move forward, suddenly revved up: its noise, as it were, saying, 'Let us all go to auntie's house.' We turned off the main road towards Santarapalli that lay ahead of us, requiring about twenty minutes' drive or at best thirty minutes. It was a narrow ribbon of a village track to travel along. The cattle herd led our way in the front and we rolled along into the village following them. Our auntie's place was somewhere deep down the road. I got down to see if the vehicle could negotiate the road. My children and my wife had followed me out. It was almost twilight and I thought it was going to be rather difficult locating the correct house in the village. It was now twenty or perhaps thirty years since I had been here last. How I wished I saw some familiar face! But who could we expect to remember us here! But to me, the village road appeared to have a ring of familiarity about it; in spite of the fact that a few houses had come up here and there. Besides the bare strips of land a couple of dilapidated houses also hit our sight. But where would be our auntie's house here then? I was somewhat puzzled. I thought of making enquiries. But how do I go about it? I couldn't get my uncle's name, much though I tried to remember it.

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Then what name did our auntie have herself? As our mother's sister, she was just our auntie; from our childhood till today that seemed to be the only identity she had for herself in relation to all of us.

There was someone there going into the village. She stopped by us, the strangers there arousing her curiosity. The woman peered through the pervading gloom and queried, 'Where're you going?'

'To our auntie's place. . . .'

'Who's she? Your auntie? What's the name? Her man?'

I retreated into silence. Our uncle's name, as I have told you, never could I remember. For a moment or two, the woman appeared thoughtful, maybe seeing us all dumbstruck. . . . Then the woman took a good look at the car and then she smiled, adding to our discomfiture. We tried to get away from her. Probably there came something to her mind, because she made some inscrutable sound a few times, as it were, to convey her sympathy at our distress. Soon, something else came over her; she turned to us and quickly said, 'Well, come with me, follow me. . . . I know whose guests you all are certainly going to be. . . . Come, come, follow. . . .' She walked in front of us; I went close after her; Sumi, Kuna and Moonmoon were following.

'Sumi,' I spoke into my wife's ear as she caught up with me, 'she looks like she's carrying a large bundle over her head—don't you see that?' Sumi missed altogether the import of my suggestion. But before she could say anything about it we had come to the doorsteps of a house.

'Look here, O Gopal's mother! See who I bring to your house; your guests.' The unknown woman called out once and that done, she melted into the thin air.

'Gopal's mother!' But they said our auntie had no offspring. Then it couldn't be our auntie's place. The woman, probably, had deposited us at somebody else's doorstep. Where had she gone away? Though we looked for her, there wasn't any trace of her anywhere. What could we do now? Where would we go from here? Helplessly we scurried about our surroundings. And then, at that very moment, we heard our auntie's call, 'O Gopal!. . .'

We were wondering if we should go up the doorsteps, up to the verandah, when the front door to the house opened up, almost by itself, and someone came out of the house with a lighted lantern in hand and invited us, 'Won't you all come in; come. . . .' I halted in my tracks when I heard the call and tried to get a glimpse of the house through the opened doors. The small patch in the room where the streaks of light fell looked well mopped-up and very neat. The clean house appeared to beckon us to get in. I went up onto the verandah, the children came up behind. 'Where's our auntie?' I couldn't see him well; the one who had appeared there on the verandah with a lantern in hand. I felt the impulse in me to walk into the house straightaway. . . .

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I stepped into the house. Still nothing stirred my memory. Could this be, after all, our auntie's house? It looked so immaculate, so neat. And honestly, that made it all the more difficult for me to feel familiar about it. Who could be there to keep this place carefully tidied up and looking so fresh? Our auntie must be over seventy years old. I could think of this much only. The boy who had carried the light with him, in the meantime, had gone away, leaving the lantern there with us. 'O Gopal!. . .' Once again we heard our auntie's call coming from the inner part of the house. Along with the sound, mingled with it, was a strained note, deep and agonizing, testifying to the fact that she might be lying there bedridden for an inordinately long time.

I was getting rather apprehensive when there wasn't any response from Gopal, although she had called out a few times. I left the children in the front room and cautiously told Sumi, 'Come with me.' Unobtrusively I proceeded on tiptoe towards the inner part of the house, my wife following me close behind.

There was a small courtyard between the front room and the other rooms located in the inner section of the house. Hedges dotted the courtyard in rows—flowering plants they should be—could be jasmine. The hedgerows weren't clearly identifiable in the darkness. Moreover, it was not the season for the jasmine to flower—the colder clime had been gone since a few days now. The sun had not grown warm enough so far. Still I perceived a spell of the sensuous sweetness of jasmine, or it could be some other fragrance, wafting across the air. Probably it constituted a chunk of my memory, of childhood, when I had come here with our mother. Perhaps the jasmine twigs were laden with blossoms then. This could be the aroma of childhood that came pervasively into the nostrils, just like that. I scanned the place all around me once over, intent on discovering something congenial about it. Had I really come to this house any time? I almost broke my head over it; but it still remained an enigma to me. I could scarcely find anything definitive about the place.

'Perhaps it is all a mistake, Sumi', I conversed with her in low tones. 'Is it really our auntie's house or have we blundered into someone else's?'

We went across the courtyard and came up the verandah on the other side. By the side of the passage there were a few rooms, some small ones and others somewhat more spacious. Inside one of the large rooms we found a wick-flame burning feebly. . . . The room housed in it the deities, our auntie's gods. The brass idols of the duo, Radha and Krishna, held court in the middle and scores of other idols in varying shapes and sizes surrounded them. Over them were placed wreaths of flowers, heaps of them, in offering; they all looked so fresh. The room was redolent with a sweet fragrance—because of the flowers certainly. Besides, there was a lighted lamp. . . . We stood there before the house-gods; but we were well aware of something else somewhere, that kept gnawing within us, making

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us very nervous. All those things were there, but our auntie? Where do we find her? Where could she be in this place?. . .

'Sumi, I can't be sure if I ever came to this house as a child. We have most certainly intruded into a different house by mistake.'

I had just about said this when, once again, we heard the plaintive note of the woman and with it came her, 'O Gopal! O Radha! Have you two gone deaf? Can't you see them, they have come here. . . . Go and see. . . .'

The voice came from the nearby room; we could place it now. The door of the room was also left ajar, just as it was in the room of the deities; but inside, it looked dark as charcoal. . . . We were impelled to bring out the lamp that was burning in the room of the deities to the adjacent room. When the dark room had some light, we saw that there was an old-fashioned bed there. A woman lay still on it; she must have been ailing over a long period. We got the shock of our lives to see her in that condition and found ourselves gripping our hands in a clasp together. . . .

The woman who lay prostrate on the bed made an effort to shift her position when she sensed both of us entering the room; but she had scarcely the energy left in her any more to accomplish that much. She tilted her head a little and looked towards us. It was now that I saw her face for the first time; but I got confused when, all things considered, I could not convince myself that she was our auntie after all. My mother's sister—could it be she really? I found myself tangled in my thoughts; I tried furiously to recall all those facts and faces that had their association with my visit to the auntie's house in childhood, but they no longer seemed to connect themselves to the scenario at hand.

From Sumi I took the lamp in my hand, moved nearer to the bed and tried to read the face of the woman closely. Whether it was because I concentrated on her lingeringly or there was something else to it, I felt a growing sense of kinship rising up within me steadily, as I gazed at the contours of her profile.

'Auntie!'

Of course, my call had no startling effect on her: but because of it, she tried to tilt her head a bit more towards us to get a good view of us and looking somewhat uncertain, she kept staring at us rather vacuously.

'Sumi, O Sumi! She is the auntie, our auntie.' I repeated myself a few times specially to fend off any hesitation that might have pervaded the feelings of my wife and to assure her. The woman who lay there ailing, God alone knows for how long, seemed to absorb my words into herself and looked very thoughtful. Thereafter, she let out a strange call in someone's name and broke into a wail. We stood there numb. But in a moment, there came from her the very familiar call, 'O Gopal! O Radha! Can't you see them, they've come.' Then she paused a little and continued, 'O Radha! Tell Gopal to rush to the market. Ain't it the market-day today? Must be. Go, go; run along, the shops might close. The guests are

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here . . . they must eat . . . take care of all that.' Our auntie's concern for all of us and so much of it, was rather reassuring to all of us; but then, who are they—this Gopal and Radha? We could hardly see a soul within the precincts of the house. Perhaps the boy who at first had held the lantern for us when we came in was Gopal. But where could he have gone now? . . . She called out loudly a few times and felt fatigued; she looked around her and mumbled unto herself. 'Them: they have been here throughout, that duo. Where have they disappeared now, just after you all came. . . . They have been here, not a day or two, but for as long as ten years. Where could they have gone right now?'

Ten years! I looked askance at wife.

'Yes, my son!' It was like a groan coming from our auntie as she continued. 'This has been the life for me for the whole of ten years. I can't even get up any more. My limbs have grown inert.' It had really been as long as a decade since our auntie became bedridden, afflicted with paralysis. Then all of a sudden where have they gone away; those who had been looking after everything in this house for such a long time? Once again Sumi lifted her eyes to me and I raised mine to look at her.

It was long past evening. . . . Kuna and Moonmoon turned fidgety in the front room and came into our auntie's room in search of us. Thereafter they got restless and demanded food to eat, very impatient now to go to sleep. I indicated to Sumi, to quietly take the children out of there. And she did just that. She excused herself out of the room to take them out and instructed the driver to get groceries and vegetables and gave him some money. The driver went away. He also took the children with him and managed to get them somewhat mollified. Sumi returned to me. Both of us stood there beside the bed of our auntie. Perhaps our auntie could not correctly make us out from our erect posture and said, 'Who's it? You Gopal! Radha! Where have you been so long? Go, look there, the kids were here demanding their grub. You milked the cow?'

Sumi and I remained calm. Sensing an atmosphere of silence, our auntie cocked her head to have a good view of us. She kept watching us for some time, turned back her head and lay there very quiet. But after a while, she turned her face again. This time she focused her vision upon Sumi. Sumi possibly got some message writ for her in the look.

Definitely a woman can read another's mind a lot better than most of us. So while instructing me to go out of the room, she attended to our auntie, carefully raising her from the bed and said, 'It's alright. I'll change the napkin. You needn't bother at all.' I returned to the room a little later and saw Sumi taking a wad of cloth off the bed. She dumped it into an empty bucket and went out of the room. Some time later the noise of Sumi washing her hands and cleaning her feet reached me. After an interval of some time, I could hear the clang of the utensils followed by the splash of water over them. Sumi must have got herself busy in the kitchen raising the fire in the hearth. The children came back. The driver had

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also returned with the groceries and vegetables and the aroma of food being cooked rose from the kitchen.

There I sat on the edge of our auntie's bed, I listened to many a lore of hers, all from the days of yore. . . . In between her unending narrative invariably she reverted to the familiar refrain. 'O Gopal! O my Radha!' Gradually it became obvious that there came replies—they emerged from the kitchen—to her calls meant for Radha. 'I'll be right there', Sumi responded, almost in a trance or was she aware of her replies? Our auntie looked lost in a reverie while awaiting her response and some more time passed.

The cooking was over. The children had their food. The driver finished his meal. Sumi laid out the beds for the children in the front room and came back to me, resuming her stand by our auntie's bed.

'Mother! O Mummy!' I was jolted out of my thoughts as I heard the tone of my wife—the words had come from her. I looked at her very consciously: she was there, the very same Sumi, my wife. On hearing the call 'Mummy', our auntie turned her head and kept looking at Sumi and the little hesitation that so long had veiled her vision seemed to have lifted completely now. Now our auntie looked towards me and whatever she might have seen in me there, prompted her to speak. 'O Gopal,' she queried, 'I've been telling you, go and milk the cow. It's not over yet; what else would be there for the kids to eat? Go, can't you hurry up?'

I didn't know what to do now. I couldn't imagine, for a while, how on earth would our auntie possess a milch cow in her present condition and have someone there to milk the animal regularly. And where have the pair of auntie's characters, Gopal and Radha, disappeared so long? There seemed to be no end to all my worries. 'Hey! Off you go! Why torture the poor beast so much because you can't milk her in time?' Our auntie was getting jittery and loud with me now and perforce I had to go. It wasn't surprising in the least that I shouldn't have known what it was like to milk a cow. We had been brought up in an altogether different environment and we seldom had the luxury of maintaining a cow of our own any time. I boasted of no knowledge about the bovine community. But I found it well nigh impossible to ignore the irresistible pull that came with our auntie's call, 'Gopal'. I persuaded myself to have a go at it and wanted to locate the cowshed in this unfamiliar house at first, before I embarked upon actually milking our auntie's cow. The cowshed was there, at the back of the house. It really surprised me to find a milch cow tied to a pole there! . . . I readied myself and walked to the cow with the milk-pot in my hand.

I released the calf from its place in one corner of the shed and let it go to its mother, with the leash still tied around the neck. The calf ran to the mother, landed a few gently pushes unto the udder as it connected and began to suckle. In a moment the milk-cord swelled and I latched the calf onto the cow's legs. Then with the pot in hand, I got to the actual milking. I took the teats and pulled the first stream of milk into the pot. That

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done, I got engaged for some time, drawing out the milk. Charrr . . . chen . . . charrr . . . chen. . . . It produced an ethereal music for my ears. In the process, my hands thawed. I could sense the presence of someone behind me, who might have been standing there since long. The cow had definitely noticed him before I was barely conscious of it, because I had noticed the animal stealthily glancing in that direction right from the moment I had so much as touched her udder. And her teats had swelled up and milk oozed out of them freely, every time the cow had looked up to him. Though I had observed the phenomenon, I didn't dare look behind me.

Milking done, I put down the milk-container carefully and undid the cord tied around the calf's neck. And he was still there standing behind me. Probably he wasn't alone; there could possibly be the pair of them—a man and a woman. 'Who . . . who the hell are you fellows?' Suddenly I wheeled around and came face to face with them. Lo and behold! They were there, the twosome, behind me, transposed after the stance of the Eternal Duo. 'You Gopal and Radha!' I had found the strength in me to shout at them addressing them by their names.

'Well, yes, we're them. . . .'

There came the profoundest answer to my query.

A piece of flute music began wailing up, as it were, somewhere deep within me.

'O Gopal! O Radha! Where have you been so long? You twosome. Our auntie keeps calling you. Can't you hear her? And you have been around here all along?' I was beginning to get desperate with them. But the pair of them still remained transfixed there, their hands joined together at each other's waist.

Their unconcern infuriated me.

'Are you so shameless? How dare you assume that posture and stand there?' I was actually shouting indeed! Very likely, Sumi had heard me yelling and had come out some time ago to find out the reason for it. She was there standing by my side.

'Alright: fancy yourselves posing like that here, in the cowshed. Well, I'll get out of here.'

I was about to get out of the cowshed feeling very furious, when I noticed the presence of my wife there. She said, very seriously, as she took the pot of milk from my hand. 'We must stay here for ten to twelve days more.' At first I couldn't get what she intended telling me. 'What for?' I came closer to my wife to get it right and looked sternly into her eyes.

Then she gave me the details. 'It must be sheer luck! Gopal and Radha, the very twosome themselves in person, nursed our auntie for ten long years. Only a bit of it, to end it all, remains there for us to take upon ourselves. It is a matter of only ten or twelve days, after all. Do you know it now? Our auntie left us, just about now. Go, wake up the driver . . . we'll

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have to make all the arrangements . . . it has to be within the night.' The firm fold of her arm held me up steadily at that moment.

Āmā Mausī, 1974 *Translated by* Saratchandra Satapathy

The Birds

MANOJ DAS

MANOJ DAS (Manoj Dās, b. 1934) is a powerful bilingual writer, with an excellent command over Oriya, his mothertongue, and English. His stories, authentically Indian in content and character, are noted for freshness of ideas, clarity of perception, undigressive style of narration, originality in the use of words and their sensitive collocation, and strong visual imagery. His language is free of cliches and moulded to suit the needs of his tales. Deeply spiritual, Manoj Das lives in the Aurobindo Ashram teaching at the Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry, and edits the prestigious cultural monthly, *The Heritage*. He has about twenty publications to his credit. *Manojdāsank Kathā O Kāhini*, a collection of short stories, won him the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Bihaṅga (The Birds) is the tragic tale of Tukan Roy, an irresponsible romantic, wilfully remaining ensconced in his private world of fantasy, oblivious of the reality and decadence around him.

Kumar Tukan Roy knelt down, as he had done evening after evening, at the end of a stroll along the marshland on the river, while the red sun, as though shot at, sank down behind the hills.

Amidst the new offshoots of the topmost bough of the old banyan tree, sat a pair of green pigeons. A son of the late Raja Saheb of Mandarpur, born to a lady other than the Rani, the now sixtyish Tukan Roy, who had forgotten whether it was in lovemaking or in hunting that his genius had bloomed first—and how early—knew well that a pair of birds seated meditatively on a bough at that hour of the day would not choose to disperse unless provoked.

He took position as discreetly as possible. His knees had long since become immune to pricks and pebbles.

He closed one eye and strained the other and took aim. Behind the birds was a patch of dark cloud, its borders gilded by the hidden sun.

Roy's finger hooked the trigger. Just then a third pigeon flew in and settled with a flutter on the branch next to the one occupied by the pair.

This is called golden luck. A little patience and adjustment and the fall of all the three is ensured: There was no need for him to hurry. The cool twilight itself taught patience. Roy changed his position as slowly as a caterpillar and took fresh aim covering all the three birds.

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The golden line around the cloud was fading fast and the cloud was swelling up. Against that still grandeur the tiny heads of the three birds looked like three tender bubbles offered to Roy for him to burst at his sweet will.

He began feeling the thrill he always had when the birds came down—their wings which had flapped over hundreds of miles, from horizon to horizon, flapping desperately for the last few times against the gravitational pull. The colour of such deaths, smoky and red, mixed well with that of the twilight. Over the hundreds of sunsets past, hundreds of such sweet deaths had steeped Roy's eyes in the same kind of smokiness and redness.

At times, dusk swooped down rather swiftly upon the valley and that is what it was doing this day. For a year past, Roy had been slowly losing faith in the sharpness of his vision. He was anxious to press the trigger, but a sudden lightning across the clouds dazzled his eyes for a moment. Just when his targets should have become visible to him once again, thunderclaps burst across the valley and they flew off.

For a while, Roy stayed put in his position with the unashamed nothing-to-do-ness of a lizard when a prey escapes its leaping tongue.

The experience was not unusual: even then, it annoyed Roy every time. It was different today, however. He felt no irritation at all. Passing over the deserted bough, his eyes reached the swelling cloud which seemed like a mighty heart in turmoil. Birds, like fairies of solace, flew across it and melted away in the infinite.

Roy kept on gazing at the cloud and the birds. There was lightning once again; a spray of misty rain tickled his eyes and cheeks. Yet he kept on gazing at the birds—more and more of them.

He stood up abruptly and leaving his gun at the spot, set off running, pacing himself with the flight of the doves overhead. He was pacing inwardly too; for, he felt that the joy he was experiencing was not entirely new; it inspired a remote memory of something similar. He felt a strong urge to trace it to its origin.

He succeeded before long. The joy he had just felt was the echo of a sensation he had had fifty years ago, when the Raja who exercised over him all the authority of a father but was not willing to allow him the status of a prince, had suddenly collapsed of a heart-attack.

It was the thrill of freedom!

The birds were in too much of a hurry. It was not possible to keep pace with them. Roy stopped and rolled his eyes across the sky—from horizon to horizon. He had never known that his eyes were so big—that they could grasp so much of the vast sky, that they were perhaps as vast as the sky itself. The birds which had just flown across the sky—across his eyes—had brushed away from them the accumulated dust of many years, which left them pure and young.

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In spite of the deepening dusk, he spent a long time in the valley before returning to the palace. And, on the dinner table, he did not feel the disgust he usually felt at a vegetarian meal. His whole being was elsewhere—though he did not know where.

But he was happy to be there.

He had captured an elegantly green parrot only a week ago. In the morning he served it breakfast, a banana, and opened its cage. It hopped experimentally and took to wing in no time. It circled twice or thrice over Roy's head and then disappeared in a headlong flight towards the woods. Roy smiled and wished that he had many birds to free, or rather, that he had the power to make every creature on earth run or fly to its heart's content towards the God-knows-where of freedom. He stood entranced in his own thoughts for quite some time.

The afternoon was cloudy again. Roy went out to the valley as usual and fired several shots. But not a single bird fell. In fact, every time he fired either below or above the covey, just to startle them away. And after every shot he followed the flying birds on foot as far as he could.

Old Giloo (also an illegitimate son of the late Raja, though lesser in rank since his mother was not one of the recognized concubines living in the palace) was surprised to see Roy returning empty-handed for two consecutive evenings. Roy was a bachelor. So was Giloo. During the good old days of the Raj these little demi-gods had no need to marry. But times had changed and the feudatory system had collapsed. Their stepbrother, the present Raja, continuously sick and sad, lived in a city. The old palace of Mandarpur, apart from a few of its corners occupied by invalid and good-for-nothing dependants, lay largely deserted and was believed to be freely used by ghosts, particularly at night.

Other than the invisible ghosts and for all practical purposes its equally invisible human inmates, the palace had another resident—a tiger. It was during the last days of Mandarpur State that the Raja, spurred by what was perhaps his last whim, had built a small zoo inside the palace compound. With his state gone, the government took charge of the animals and transferred them to a public zoo in the city. But at the insistence of Giloo, they had spared a tiger cub that was unwell at the time. The cub had grown fully and perhaps grown a little old prematurely. However, Giloo had fostered the animal as carefully as he could with the blessing of the *shikari*, Tukan Roy.

Giloo used to cook for Roy. For two days now both had had to do with vegetarian dishes since the meat which Giloo could secure was barely sufficient for the tiger. Giloo was saddened at the thought that Roy was getting old, perhaps he was failing as a hunter.

Roy left his bed at midnight. He walked quietly up to Giloo's cot and picked up the key of the tiger's cage from a hook above the bed and stepped out on tiptoe.

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The tiger lay asleep inside its cage. The moonlight focused on its big face. In spite of its familiarity, it would have been a fearful sight, but for the moonlight. The magic of moonlight reduced it to a tiger in a dream or to one drawn in water colour.

Roy did not know that so much joy could be there in turning the key in the lock. In a choked voice he addressed the tiger which had just raised its head inquiringly, 'Come on, my boy, you are free. Now, run into the forest. Well, don't waste your time yawning—hope that's what you're doing—surely you're not gaping to measure up my damned head! You should behave as a grateful boy, shouldn't you? Now, come out.'

Roy held the door wide open. The tiger stood up and with hesitant steps came out into the open and stopped, its eyes fixed on Roy's.

Roy crossed the palace gate and stood on the road. The tiger did alike and stood behind him. Roy pointed his finger at the hills and the forest and said, 'Run, my boy, run. There—that is your natural habitat.'

But the tiger only moved closer to him, fondly sniffing at him and swinging its tail with some reservation.

'What are you surveying? I am useless. There are deer galore in the forest. Run! Forgotten to run, eh? Well, it is like this!'

Roy began to run and soon gathered speed, for, after all, he was setting an example to none other than a tiger! The animal began to overcome its hesitation or lack of practice and gathered gusto.

'Good. This is how you are to run, right? Go on! Only a mile and you reach your true home', said Roy as he struggled with his breath. But the tiger had stopped, motionless except for its tail.

'Who is there, please? Two thieves, are you?' The exclamation obviously made by somebody still sleepy, awoke Roy to the fact that he stood before the Police Station and the Block Development Office. A number of dogs had begun barking from several directions. Before he could think out his next course of action, a torchlight flashed on him and the tiger, and the stern voice from the Police Station changed into an abrupt howl.

Roy started running again. The tiger followed suit. They ran along the rocky meadow and through the prickly bushes. Roy had realized that the tiger would not run without him. And he could not stop before convincing the tiger that it had been granted the supreme thing—its freedom. Nor could he stop before feeling sure that the animal had truly appreciated the gift. Once reconciled to the inevitability of his having to run into the forest, Roy ran with a wild enthusiasm—with the forest ahead, the night around and the tiger sometimes behind him and sometimes beside.

They had run for about a quarter of an hour when he realized that a jeep was rushing behind them. Perhaps the officials at the Police Station and the Development Office were pursuing them with the intention of rescuing Roy from the tiger! He stopped and told the tiger, 'Go ahead, you fool! Here is the forest, spread over miles—over districts. Now you must make it alone.'

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But the tiger did nothing of the sort. Roy had to resume running. He certainly did not wish to be discovered by the rescue party.

The jeep had moved off in a slightly different direction. Roy entered the forest. He stumbled and stopped and ran again till he came to a denser part. He could not run any more. A patch of moonlight showed a relatively clean slab of rock. He stretched himself upon it. The tiger stood close to him, surveying its surroundings and its liberator's face alternatively.

With every cool breath of the forest air he inhaled, Roy felt like taking a wave of freedom into his veins. The feeling was great, though tranquil.

He slapped the tiger and said, 'Still you don't understand, eh? How stupidly innocent you are!'

But the tiger was perhaps waking up to the spirit that reigned in the forest of the night. He suddenly gave out an impressive roar.

Birds tittered and flew away from the nearby trees. Also there were sounds of the panicky footsteps of some small animals. The roar produced distinct echoes in the hills. Roy felt happy, but he slapped the tiger once again. 'You fool!' he said. 'Won't they hear you?' He pulled the animal down by the neck as though in an attempt to hide it within himself. The tiger was obliged to sit down, its forelegs on Roy's chest. Roy saw in the tiger's face nothing more than an intimate cat. He closed his eyes with satisfaction.

And in his vision were flying hundreds of birds—green, white, of so many hues. The hundreds became thousands. They were scattering into ever-expanding heights and horizons like silver arrows and golden bullets. Roy, his eyes still closed, recognized them as the vibrations of the freedom that electrified him—freedom vaster and vaster still.

At last the two were caught under the jeep's headlights. Next was heard a booming shot. The tiger was staring at the light. It lowered its head slowly to rest on Roy's chest.

'The scoundrel has finished off Mr Roy. After chasing him all the way, it must have pounced upon him here.'

'He might still be alive.'

'No. Both are dead.'

'But isn't it strange that Mr Roy seems to be without a scratch? How did he die?'

'Er—well—a ferocious tiger jumping on one is enough to kill one.'

'Pity! Giloo will weep. Both were so dear to him!'

Bihaṅga *Translated by* the author

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